

WHY WALT WHITMAN EXPLORES AMATIVENESS AND ADHESIVENESS  
IN SOME OF HIS POETRY

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass is a devastatingly controversial book. Two primary reasons for this may be traced to Whitman's candid treatment of amativeness and adhesiveness in some of his poetry and to his deliberate attempt to shroud in secrecy certain aspects of his own life that could be directly related to the emotions treated in some of his poetry. The poet stressed that he considered himself an extension of all his poetry; subsequently many critics assumed that the poems which deal with either amativeness or adhesiveness reflect a facet of his own personality.

The purpose of this study is to show why Walt Whitman used amativeness and adhesiveness in some of his poetry. This will be accomplished by literally developing a picture of Walt Whitman's personality through biography; by showing how phrenology influenced Whitman; by pointing to specific poems in "Calamus" and "Children of Adam" to show the emotions that were expressed in these clusters of poems; and by discussing the controversy surrounding Whitman's poetic treatment of these emotions.

## CHAPTER I

### THE SHAPING OF A POET

#### A. Ancestral Heritage

"No American author better illustrates Taine's theory of the shaping influence of heredity, environment and epoch than Walt Whitman. Not only was Whitman himself aware of these influences, he eagerly embraced them and adopted in his maturity the ambition to give poetic expression to his time, place, nation, and the development of his own character and talent in the midst and with the help of these forces."<sup>1</sup>

The era through which he lived was perhaps one of the most fateful, exciting and paradoxical periods in American history--the nineteenth century. It was a time when "idealism countered materialism; science had begun to supersede traditional religious faith; humanitarian goals were ever-threatened by selfish motives. All men, it was argued,

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<sup>1</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961), p. 9.

should be free and equal--but in reality some enjoyed special advantages, either inherited or seized. Regional interests fought angrily against each other and against national solidarity, while the nation itself battled to expand its dominion. Within the American character gross crudity and outlandish prudery coexisted uneasily, and citizens of the new republic expressed both a chauvinistic bravado and a cultural inferiority complex."<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass encompasses the many feelings, experiences and conflicts within himself and society. Whitman's life can be compared to an open road that must be traveled to get an understanding of most of his literary work.

Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!<sup>2</sup>

On May 31, 1819, Walt Whitman's journey through life began. He was the second of nine children born to Walter and Louisa Whitman. (One of the children died in infancy.)

The Whitman's lived in West Hills on Long Island in a sturdy farmhouse built by Walt's father, a carpenter, who was trying his hand at farming at that time. Although

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Marinacci, O Wondrous Singer! An Introduction to Walt Whitman (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1970), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Sculley Bradley (ed.), Walt Whitman-Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1949), p. 128.

West Hills was some thirty miles east of New York City, its appearance and spirit was almost primitive in comparison to New York City. Walt spent his first few years in a simple, natural, unspoiled atmosphere. He was basically a child of nature who liked to wander around the farm, in the meadowland, along the shore line and in the woods.

This pristine world to which Walt was introduced made deep and lasting impressions upon him, as he later indicated in one of his poems, "There Was A Child Went Forth"---

There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he look'd upon, that object  
he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day or  
a certain part of the day,  
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.<sup>1</sup>

In her book, O Wondrous Singer!, Barbara Marinacci stated that "in a poet's youth the patterns and directions of his thinking and feeling are set, and he gathers in the vital images which eventually will emerge in his poetry."<sup>2</sup> What young Walt saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched-- along with the things that he felt inside, and his thoughts about those things--all eventually were, indeed, manifested in his poetry.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>2</sup>Marinacci, p. 6.

Just as nature greatly influenced his future poetry, Walt's family played an influencing role, for he was descended from them. Therefore, who and what they were partly determined the person he was to become.

His own parents, he that had father'd him and  
she that had conceiv'd him in her womb and  
birth'd him,  
They gave this child more of themselves than that,  
They gave him afterward every day, they became a  
part of him.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, they were a part of him: he inherited much from his parents.

Walt's father, the son of a farmer and a mild-mannered schoolteacher, was of English descent and represented the fifth generation of Whitmans on Long Island. He received only a rudimentary formal education, but was deeply interested in books and ideas. There was one subject in which he was especially interested: gaining full equality for the common man.<sup>2</sup>

Some of Walter Whitman's associations or friendships, and some of his reading material, indicate that he was a

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 304.

<sup>2</sup>Marinacci, p. 10.



freethinker. He had known the notorious freethinker and author of the Age of Reason, Tom Paine. He also knew Elias Hicks, the radical Quaker preacher, who defended Paine when other churchmen were busy maligning him. After defending Paine, Hicks became the leader of a more liberal branch of the Quakers which became better known as the Hicksites. Although he never took an active part in any church, Walter Whitman's sympathies always remained with the Hicksites. According to Gay Wilson Allen in The Solitary Singer, Walter Whitman owned and read Count Volney's Ruins, an epitome of the political and Deistic philosophy of the French Revolution, and he subscribed to the Free Inquirer, published by the notorious socialists, Frances Wright and Dale Owens. Thus, through his father, Walt came under the influence of rationalism and liberal political thought early in life.<sup>1</sup>

Walt's mother was of Dutch-Welsh descent. Her father, "Major" Cornelius Van Velsor, was a Dutch farmer and horse-breeder; her mother was descended from seafaring Welshmen. Since the Whitmans lived only a few miles from the Van Velsors, Walt visited them frequently and probably accom-

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<sup>1</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1955), p. 8.

panied his grandfather to Brooklyn and sometimes even to New York, by way of the ferry, to market his farm produce.

His grandmother, Naomi or Amy Van Velsor, was a member of the Quaker church; therefore she used the traditional language of the Friends, which included using "thees" "thous" and "thys" and referred to days and months by numerals instead of names. She was a very gentle woman who often related old seafaring tales to Walt.

He later exuded many qualities that could probably be attributed to his forebears. From his English forebears he probably acquired a firm dedication to ideas and ideals, a liberal mind for religion and politics, an intense interest in national history and a desire to teach others. From his Dutch forebears he probably acquired his hardiness. From his Welsh forebears he probably acquired his gift for language and the love for the ocean that he maintained even until death. As Walt himself so aptly put it:

They gave him afterward every day, they became a part of him.<sup>1</sup>

Walt's parents had two distinctly different personalities. He depicted his father as:

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 304.

...strong, self-sufficient, manly, mean, anger'd, unjust,  
The blow, the quick loud word, the tight bargain,  
the crafty lure...

From this poetic sketch of his father, and from biographical information, it can be deduced that his father was a temperamental man whose love and approval were not given or displayed very freely. He was a man who devised business schemes which he thought would bring immediate success; instead, they usually resulted in failure. Consequently, the frustration and disappointment that he felt were usually taken out on his family.

Walt's mother, a woman with very little education, was a very sensible, mild-mannered, patient, loving person. Her main concern was her family's welfare. Although she may not have fully understood her children, Walt in particular, she always accepted them just as they were, never expecting or demanding anything from them. It was probably for this reason that Walt was so attached to her.

Although Walt "experienced opposites in the very natures of his parents, these contradictions somehow balanced each other. He soon realized that the whole universe pulsated with this same opposition or polarity of things joined in an intimate, eternal bondage: positive and negative,

light and darkness, life and death, male and female. The human sphere also abounded in other dichotomies: love and hate, faith and doubt, real and ideal, good and evil, body and soul, self and society. As a poet, Walt Whitman would explore and try to define the essential unity of such diametrical forces."<sup>1</sup>

#### B. Walt Whitman's Childhood

As the Whitman family increased in number, the degree of difficulty in supporting his family also increased for Walter Whitman; hence in 1823 the Whitmans moved to Brooklyn, where the building business was booming and where he felt sure that he would succeed in his chosen vocation--carpentry.

Very few details are known about Walt Whitman's early life. However, later in life the poet recalled three or four influences that he experienced during those early years in Brooklyn. Perhaps the most outstanding experience occurred on July 4, 1825, when General Lafayette, the old Revolutionary war hero, came to Brooklyn to lay a cornerstone

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<sup>1</sup>Marinacci, pp. 12-13.

for a new library. He lifted Walt Whitman over a trench so that he could get a better view of the ceremony. When he set Walt down he supposedly gave the child a hug and a kiss. This lingered in young Walt's memory and was later considered to be a prophetic blessing.<sup>1</sup> "Walt fancied that Lafayette had instinctively selected him as a spokesman-to-be for democracy--a verbal link between the brave and idealistic men who had battled to establish the new American republic that assured the rights of the common man and those future ranks of Americans who surely would need instructions and renewed inspiration from the nation's past."<sup>2</sup>

Walt's public school education began at age six. He attended school for about six years before he found the contemporary educational methods of rote learning and rigid discipline too much to cope with, so he traded the stifling classroom for the crowded city streets, where true learning began to take place for him.

In the streets Walt was able to become thoroughly familiar with and knowledgeable of all that interested him

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer..., p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Marinacci, p. 16.

in his surroundings, such as the people and their jobs, the massive material structures, the wharves, the ferries, the sky, the water and the land. Although he was not cognizant of this at that time, he would "sing" of these same things in his future poetry.

#### C. Walt Whitman - The Youth

Walt's family moved frequently during his youth. His father tried speculating in real estate with little success, and supporting his large family on a carpenter's wages became increasingly difficult. Therefore, it became necessary for the boys of the family to find employment to help support themselves. Jesse went to sea and Walt became an office boy, first for a law firm and then for a doctor.

One of the lawyers in the law firm made a great contribution to Walt's education by helping him with his handwriting and composition, and, even more significantly, by giving him a card to a circulating library. That library card was the key to the door of knowledge for Walt. He read all of the novels and poetry of Walter Scott and then went on in pursuit of quite a comprehensive self-education.

After working for the law firm for about a year Walt realized that he would not enjoy a career in law, and after leaving the law firm he became an apprentice to a doctor for a very brief period of time before he realized that he would not enjoy a career in medicine, either.

When Walt was almost fourteen years old he became an apprentice in the printing office of Samuel E. Clements, editor of the Long Island Patriot. It was there that he developed an interest in journalism. Subsequently his literary ambition began to bud, for the editor occasionally printed some of the verses and stories that Walt submitted to the paper. That gave Walt the inspiration to submit some of his work to one of the most celebrated magazines in New York--the New York Mirror; one of his pieces was accepted and printed. Gay Wilson Allen states, in his book, Walt Whitman, that this was the point where "his vanity of authorship was born."<sup>1</sup>

Another one of Walt's lifelong interests, that in politics, had its origin at the Patriot. It was there that he listened to and participated in the "animated political discussions and read the partisan positions that the paper

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman, p. 18.

advocated."<sup>1</sup> The paper, in representing the interests of Tammany politicians, attempted to appeal to the growing population of the skilled working men. One of its slogans was "the right of the people to rule in every case."<sup>2</sup>

After his early training in the printing trade at the Long Island Patriot, Walt became an apprentice with the Long Island Star, the rival paper to the Long Island Patriot. The Star was Whig, and primarily supported the business and manufacturing interests of Brooklyn and the nation. Marinacci said of its editor, Alden Spooner, that he was "a public spirited man who knew how to make words work for the good of the citizens by arousing them to positive action. Walt clearly saw the newspaper's ability to influence the populace."<sup>3</sup>

Walt's lifetime fascination with public speaking started while he was an apprentice with the Star. Just as he recognized the newspaper's power of persuasion, he could

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Marinacci, p. 35.



see how oratory had the power to "alter or expand people's feelings and thinking."<sup>1</sup>

Walt was also able to obtain free passes to the dramas performed in New York City. It was while attending these dramas that Walt began to notice that drama had the ability "to sway an entire audience all at once, working through the imagination, rather than by making a direct appeal to the emotions and the intellect as both journalism and oratory did."<sup>2</sup>

Because he was so intrigued by actors, Walt studied their techniques of portraying roles, of temporarily becoming people other than themselves. Barbara Marinacci made a point when she said that "Walt may have wondered whether in life itself a person might actually become what he at first pretended to be. During Whitman's entire manhood he seemed to be portraying a succession of roles, interrelated yet distinct in their phases. And in both Whitman and the poetry he wrote there is an interesting similarity between his suggestions for actors depicting characters on stage and his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 36-37.

own ultimate assumption of a special 'Personality' --- a self-designed, self-imposed role intended to impress others with its 'magnetism.'"<sup>1</sup>

Walt completed his apprenticeship in 1835. He worked as a printer in New York City until the city was overwhelmed by an economic depression. Unable to find work in his trade, Walt turned to teaching in the country schools of Long Island.

Granted, he only had a meager education, but he did have "some important qualifications for teaching at a time when few were required by school boards. He loved children and, unlike most teachers of the period, he believed in keeping discipline by persuasion rather than by the rod. He strove constantly to find ways to interest children in the tasks that he set for them. For example, he played 'Twenty Questions' with them and invented other educational games."<sup>2</sup>

During his teaching career he left the schoolroom twice to do other things. The first time he left was in 1838, when he started his own newspaper, the Long Islander. After about eight months of publishing his paper he either became restless or, perhaps, was strongly advised by his backers to sell the paper, and he did.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman, p. 19.

Then, in 1839, he went to work as a writer and typesetter for the Long Island Democrat, edited by James Brenton. While still on leave in the fall of 1840, he participated in the presidential campaign of 1840 as Democratic electioneer for Queens County. Any political ambitions that Whitman may have had inevitably dwindled after his exposure to certain politicians and their followers in New York.

#### D. Walt Whitman - The Man

In the spring of 1841 Walt began to direct his attention to furthering his own ambitions as a writer. The Democratic Review published several stories of Walt's, and two of his poems were published in January, 1842, in the New World. (Walt had worked for the New World since the spring of 1841 as a printer.)

In the spring of 1842 Walt became editor of the Aurora, a daily New York City newspaper. Under this editorship many topical matters of the day were presented in the Aurora, such as prohibition, abolition of slavery, health fads, women's rights, socialism, free love, mesmerism, and religious cults, just to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

Walt's editorship of the Aurora ended in May, 1842, after a quarrel with his employers. He was not without work for long, for in the summer of 1842 Walt was hired as editor of another New York City newspaper, the Evening Tattler. In September of that same year he was fired. For the next few years he worked only intermittently at regular newspaper jobs. He supported himself mainly by free-lance journalism and by selling stories to magazines.

Walt's return to Brooklyn in August, 1845 marked a new period of journalistic experience for him. He was first employed on the Long Island Star as a reporter. He wrote about temperance, manners, educational reform, amateur theatrical performances, music programs in Brooklyn and in New York City, and even gave moral and practical advice to young people.

In 1846 Walt became editor of the Brooklyn Eagle. As editor he frequently took decisive positions on many questions of the day, such as the abolition of slavery, the setting aside of prejudices towards foreigners, women's rights, abolishing capital punishment, physical hygiene, original, non-imitative American literature and music, humanizing education, and civic improvements. Walt advocated those causes because he actually believed in what he was saying.

As Marinacci said, Walt "rarely gave out advice which he himself did not, or ultimately would not, heed."<sup>1</sup>

There was one notable exception. He demanded of his readers that "'If you have good health, are over twenty-one years old, and have nothing to encumber you, go and get married.' On Walt's list of the world's fools were the bachelors and maidens old enough to marry, but likely to 'die and give no sign' of ever having desired or intended to marry. 'There be some, doubtless, who may not be blamed, whom peculiar circumstances keep in the bands of the solitary, but the most of both sexes can find partners meant for them. Turn, Fools, and get discretion. Buy cradles and double beds; make yourself a reality in life--and do the State some service.'"<sup>2</sup>

Marinacci went on to say that, although Walt was fully qualified for marriage, "he showed small inclination to supply his own life with new furniture." The reasons for this can only be speculated about. Perhaps one reason is that "no one ever measured up to his idealization of his own mother as a woman and mate. Or perhaps there were other

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<sup>1</sup>Marinacci, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

'peculiar circumstances' all his own which made him delay marrying; whatever the reason, he never showed much romantic interest in girls."<sup>1</sup>

Speculating even further, Marinacci said that "Walt may have felt that his own imagination supplied the best 'cradles and double beds.' He could alter child or woman to suit his mood; and when other concerns engrossed him, his 'family' discreetly vanished--instead of intruding or crying or asking him to rush to the grocers to buy a quart of milk. Yet while they stayed, to him they were probably as real and as wonderful as any wife or child could be."<sup>2</sup>

It should also be pointed out that Whitman reviewed in the Eagle many of the authors whose direct influence can be traced in the poetry which he wrote after he reviewed their writings. Among them were Carlyle, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Michelet, George Sand, Goethe, and the writings of some contemporary faddists such as Mary S. Gove, the advocate of the "water cure," and O. S. Fowler, the phrenologist.<sup>3</sup> "To

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 81.

judge by later results on Whitman's thinking and writing, some of these authors were subtly emancipating him from the puritanism and asceticism he had been taught..."<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of American life that he frequently treated in his editorials was politics. Ironically, it was a political stand which he took that proved to be his temporary political undoing. Walt vigorously attacked all democrats who did not support the Wilmot Proviso. Unfortunately, his employer was one of the local leaders in opposition to it. Hence Walt was dismissed from his post around the end of January, 1848.

Soon after losing that job, Walt met a man in a theater lobby one night who was starting a newspaper in New Orleans. Impressed with Walt, he quickly made a deal with him to serve on the editorial staff of his new paper.

Two days later, Walt's journey through life continued, for he, accompanied by his younger brother Jeff, traveled to New Orleans. Walt's stay in that southern city proved to be a lonely one. He generally worked long hours, from nine in the morning until eleven in the evening.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

As a reporter for the Crescent, he frequently attended social and cultural events. It was on one of these occasions that Walt saw Gen. Zachary Taylor, who was just back from the Mexican War. This was an event that Walt cherished, for he greatly admired this plain-talking, unpretentious, courageous "man of the people."

It was also during his stay in New Orleans that Walt steadfastly defended public exposure of the human body, just as he had previously expressed praises of the human body in the Eagle. This position came as a result of having seen a show called "Model Artists" in which scantily--dressed performers assumed the poses of famous statues. His attitude was completely alien to that customarily published in the press.

Walt's sojourn in New Orleans lasted for only three months, but his memories of that portion of the South, its customs, its people and its prevailing atmosphere of friendliness and gaiety, along with various less mentionable aspects, would vividly stay in his mind for a lifetime. His journey to and away from the South eventually offered "many authentic details and provided broad background scenery for the 'catalogues' of American life in *Leaves of Grass*".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Marinacci, p. 93.



By the middle of June, 1848, Walt had plunged back into politics, engaging in the heated disputes surrounding the presidential election. He attended the Democratic Convention, where the antislavery "Barnburners" split off from the "Old hunkers" and held their own caucus, which he also attended. The new party, known as the Free-Soil Party, selected former President Martin Van Buren as its candidate to oppose Lewis Cass, the choice of the Democrats, and Zachary Taylor, the choice of the Whigs.

To promote his party's candidate and its opinions prior to the election, Walt started a weekly paper called the Freeman. But a fire destroyed the printing office the day after the publication of the first issue. By the time Walt was able to publish again, the election was over and Taylor was the victor. Walt remained editor of that paper for one year.

Forces were now at work within Walt Whitman to alter his way of life. He had recently seen for himself other regions of his great nation and watched many of its people's doings. The experience had deeply moved him and set him to wondering anew why no American writer had yet captured, or even tried to capture, the vast shape and vital spirit of the United States.

During the nearly thirty years of his life Walt had absorbed so very much; and what he had not actually experienced he could hear and read about

and vividly imagine. If no one else would undertake the job of putting the whole of America into a book, why not he?<sup>1</sup>

### E. Walt Whitman - The Poet

After giving up editing the Freeman in 1849, Walt free-lanced for newspapers in Brooklyn and in New York City, but he seemingly was not too anxious to obtain another position as editor on any newspaper. That year marked the true beginning of Walt's transformation from journalist to poet. It was "during that year that he received satisfying "proof" that nature herself had really intended him to take up this new career: the shape of his own head gave the best evidence."<sup>2</sup>

Walt had great faith in every aspect of science. Phrenology was a faddish "science" of that century which held that human character could be determined by studying an individual's skull. A phrenologist would feel the protrusions and depressions of the various zones of his subject's cranium and then draw up a comprehensive chart of the subject's personality, including attributes and defects.

Walt had his own "Chart of Bumps" drawn up by Lorenzo Fowler, an expert American phrenologist. In his analysis

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

Fowler confirmed Walt's long held desire to become a poet when he asserted that Walt possessed, to a notable degree, attributes of a poet. Hungerford, an expert on Walt's dealings with the phrenologists, said that Walt turned to phrenology because he regarded it as a sound scientific analysis of human character on which he could base his poetry.<sup>1</sup> Since Walt maintained such a high regard for this "science," it may be safe to assume that Fowler's analysis of his character may well have been the stimulus that Walt needed to propel him into his new career.

The next six years of his life were spent in apprenticeship. Much of his time was expended in doing the things that were most appealing to him, such as reading everything from the British reviews to the extensive works of Emerson; studying modern science; learning about astronomy; attending theatrical performances; visiting the Egyptian Museum and the World's Fair; acquainting himself with the cosmopolitan lives and opinions of contemporary artists; associating with people in all walks of life, but particularly the uneducated or the masses; and attending the Italian opera. Not only were these experiences appealing, but he probably felt that

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Hungerford, "Walt Whitman and His Chart of Bumps," American Literature, II (Jan., 1931), p. 360.

they were necessities in preparing for his new career. His method of supporting himself had to be of such a nature that it would allow the time that he needed to pursue his interests. Since the building business (carpentry) was enjoying a period of prosperity and Walt already had the necessary skills, he became a carpenter. He built a three-story building in Brooklyn in which he housed his own little printing shop and bookstore on the ground floor, and he and his family lived upstairs briefly. To supplement his income from these business endeavors, he did some newspaper writing and real estate speculating.

On July 6, 1855, copies of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass went on sale at Swayne's on Fulton St. in Brooklyn and at Fowler and Wells on Broadway in New York City. It was a thin volume of poems of ninety-five pages, bound in green cloth with the title and border ornately stamped in gold leaf. The author was identified only by an engraved portrait; by a name obscurely placed mid-way of the first, long, untitled poem, which was later called "Song of Myself"; and in the copyright notice. The book of poems was printed by the Rome Brothers in Brooklyn under Walt's direction.

In the introduction to Whitman: Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose, Sculley Bradley said

As the poet repeatedly asserted, Leaves of Grass was from the first intended to be one poem of many poems continuously revised and enlarged in the light of his experience. If he wrote with reference to himself, the first personal pronoun was socialized, like the 'I' of old ballads, and he would 'assume' for himself only what all others could have on their own terms.<sup>1</sup>

On the development of Leaves of Grass, Bradley said

The growth of Leaves of Grass was precisely what Whitman had foreseen when he began... 'Hoping not to cease till death.' Proofs of the last edition of 1891, several times the size of the first, actually passed through his hands only on his deathbed a few months before he died in March, 1892. The book developed almost without benefit of publishers. The third edition, in 1860, was accepted by the courageous young firm of Thayer and Eldridge, but the Civil War put them out of business at once. All other editions before 1881 were simply printed wherever the poet happened to be--in Brooklyn, Washington, or Camden, New Jersey--while their title pages asserted that they were 'Handled by Walt Whitman.' Whoever has the luck to find the successive editions all in one place will observe the developing thematic nature of the whole work, especially through the eight editions culminating in that of 1881. It was as though certain leit-motifs were progressively associated in the symphonic development of two correlated themes. One was the 'simple, separate person' as body, mind and immortal; the other the enlarging experience of such a person in the 'Democratic...En Masse.'<sup>2</sup>

As Walt watched the birth of his book in July, 1855, he also watched the death of his father. His high hopes

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. vi.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

for the newborn child of his genius probably distracted him from fully participating in domestic sorrow. Here came new life: and would the world welcome it?

The overall response to Walt's book of poems was less than he had hoped for. Many people ignored the work completely, while others read it and found it offensive. To generate interest and to stimulate sales, Walt anonymously wrote three favorable reviews himself. However, there were several judges other than Walt who looked upon the book of poems with favor in their reviews. The most outstanding of these was Ralph Waldo Emerson. The letter that Emerson wrote to pay tribute to Walt's accomplishment has become the most famous tribute ever paid to any unknown writer by such a celebrated man of letters.

In his letter Emerson said:

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of Leaves of Grass. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes me happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork or too much lymph in the temperament were making our western wits fat and mean. I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment, which so delights me, and which large perception only can inspire. I greet you at the beginning of a new career, which yet must have

had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging.

I did not know until I, last night, saw the book advertised in the newspaper, that I could trust the name as real and available for a postoffice. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks, and visiting New York to pay you my respects.<sup>1</sup>

Emerson probably never dreamed that his laudatory letter would be used as a public endorsement of Leaves of Grass and its author's abilities, but on October 10, 1855 his letter was printed in the Tribune without his permission. Although Emerson was probably displeased with Walt's action, he never retracted his endorsement. In spite of this, he continued to promote Walt's fame by recommending that notably accomplished people visit the young poet.

Emerson was not the only promoter of Walt's fame, for it was learned that the book was favorably received by quite a few, Englishmen and Americans alike. Thus it was not Emerson's letter alone that encouraged him to prepare a second edition which was ready for distribution by late summer, 1856.

The 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass is distinguished by further use of the now-famous letter from Emerson printed

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman, p. 58.

inside the book along with an open-letter reply from Whitman addressed to his "Master." In his open letter to Emerson Walt declared that his life's work would be that of "making" poems.<sup>1</sup> He boasted of his intention to continue making poems until he had made several hundred--perhaps a thousand. He went on to assert that the average yearly demand for his poems would be ten or twenty thousand copies.<sup>2</sup>

Although he never witnessed a yearly sale as great as the one he boasted of, he never stopped making poems until his death. The growth of his Leaves was indeed his life-work.

After publishing the first edition of Leaves of Grass Walt returned to journalism. During several months, from the fall of 1855 to the spring of 1856, he wrote a group of informative articles, mainly about New York, for Life Illustrated, a Fowler and Wells publication.

During the following summer Walt took note of the political situation. (It was another presidential election year.) As he looked over the field of candidates he felt very little enthusiasm for any of them, but decided that

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



the one that came closest to his ideal was John C. Fremont, the Republican Party candidate. So he wrote a political tract called "The Eighteenth Presidency" which was intended as an endorsement for the kind of candidate that Fremont supporters claimed him to be. This political tract stands as evidence of Walt's continued concern over the issues that had lost him the editorship of the Eagle and strangled the Freeman.

The only obvious result of "The Eighteenth Presidency" was that Walt was employed by George C. Bennett, the owner of the Brooklyn Daily Times, to edit the Times. Bennett had also supported Fremont for President. Walt worked as editor of the Times for two years. During that time his editorials enhanced such causes as running the street cars on Sunday for the laboring men on their one day of recreation; exposing political corruption; and providing Brooklyn with pure, abundant water. He wrote informative articles on prostitution and vice, also, and denounced "rowdyism," prize fights, and any kind of brutality and injustice. In an effort to expose various ministers for their failings and hypocrisies, Walt only brought on the wrath of the respectable churchgoers, who in turn pressured Bennett into dismissing him.

Just after Walt lost his editorship of the Times, he evidently had a good deal of leisure time, for he often visited Pfaff's Restaurant in New York City. Pfaff's, the favorite hangout of a group of Bohemian writers and artists, was frequented by Walt almost daily for two or three years.

Henry Clapp, the editor of the Saturday Press, a literary review, was one of Walt's Bohemian friends. He printed "A Child's Reminiscence" in the special 1859 Christmas issue of the Saturday Press, thereby giving Walt the added encouragement that he needed at that time.

Walt needed encouragement, because he was going through a period of "black despair," as Marinacci labelled it. There are no records to indicate that Walt had experienced any unhappy love affair or the loss of a loved one by death in 1858 or 1859, but many of his manuscripts of this period testified to his sense of loneliness, solitude and longing for love and friendship. His despair was intensified by the loss of his editorial position on the Times and the failure of his second edition of Leaves of Grass to sell as he had boasted it would in his open letter to Emerson.

One of his poems, "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life" offers a basis for the poet's period of "black despair."

While walking along Long Island's shoreline one autumn afternoon Walt felt "seiz'd by the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot"<sup>1</sup> and identified himself with the debris, with wreckage and failure.

I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up drift,  
 A few sands and dead leaves to gather,  
 Gather, and merge myself as part of the sands and drift.  
 O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,  
 Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,  
 Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,  
 But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd,  
 Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows,  
 With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written,  
 Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.  
 I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single object, and that no man ever can,  
 Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart upon me and sting me,  
 Beacuse I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all.<sup>2</sup>

The poet's frustration soon abated and became replaced by the belief that "the flow will return,"<sup>3</sup> for such is the nature of the ocean of life.

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 214.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 214-215.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

The "flow" did return, for a few months later Walt was offered an opportunity to have his third edition of Leaves of Grass published by a young publishing firm in Boston, Thayer and Eldridge. A contract was agreed upon, and Walt went to Boston to oversee the printing of the book. In May the book was completed, so Walt returned to Brooklyn and his friends at Pfaff's.

The 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass has been called Whitman's most revealing, important and interesting version. According to Allen, "It was a thick duodecimo volume of 546 pages, bound in heavy boards stamped with symbolical designs, on the front cover a globe swimming in space, on the back a sun half risen (or half set) out of the ocean, and on the backstrip a butterfly perched on an extended forefinger, evidently illustrating the cosmic, spatial, and nature themes and motifs of the book. The frontispiece was an engraving from an oil portrait of Whitman in a Victor Hugo pose."<sup>1</sup>

In this version of Leaves of Grass Walt assumed the task of treating two themes: (a) to make poems for the States, and (b) to propagate the ideal of manly love. In his poetry Walt tried to fuse and reconcile these national and

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, p. 74.

amatory motives through the doctrine that only personal love and companionship can compact "These States." Walt advanced his program of literary nationalism in "Chants Democratic"; proclaimed the procreative or amative instincts in mankind in "Enfans d' Adam"; and celebrated loving friendship between men, adhesiveness, in "Calamus."

Life went on as usual for Walt after the publication of his 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass. He still associated regularly with the Pfaff crowd, rode the Broadway stages with his friends, the drivers and conductors, and kept close watch on the Presidential nominations and campaigns of that year.

When Walt received news of the first indication of the Civil War on April 12, 1861, his life style underwent an immediate change. He prepared his body and soul for the ordeal ahead by resolving to ignore all drinks but water and pure milk and all fat meats and late suppers.

Walt's younger brother George enlisted in a volunteer regiment immediately after obtaining the news. But Walt never enlisted, probably for two reasons: (1) He was forty-two years old; and (2) He had to support his mother and dependent brother Eddie. Walt did, however, make a contribution a few weeks after George enlisted. He wrote a

recruiting poem called "Beat! Beat! Drums!" which was published, in the New York Leader and Harper's Weekly simultaneously, on September 28, 1861.

After many months of poem-making Walt retreated into a period of tense watching and hoping. He read every account of the war in newspapers and listened to accounts by soldiers who had actually participated in the battles.

While reading over a list of the wounded in the Herald, in December, 1862, Walt spotted the name George W. Whitmore among the wounded of the 51st New York Volunteers -- his brother's regiment. Walt left Brooklyn that same afternoon to search for George. He was relieved to find him in Fredericksburg, Virginia, all in one piece and on active duty. Walt stayed there for a few days and became thoroughly familiar with the life of soldiers. For he observed everything and asked questions of everyone, while taking notes on what he saw and was told.

Rather than merely continue to do things that were seemingly useless, Walt began to make the rounds of the hospitals at the camp. He began to feel as though he had been magnetically drawn to the wounded and dying men. Hence he felt that he couldn't just leave them.

Walt arranged to stay in Washington after he had delivered a trainload of wounded soldiers to one of the hospitals there. For several years he was to be an angel of mercy--a wound-dresser for those who had fought in the Civil War. Without compensation, he passed out gifts, read to patients, wrote to their families or sweethearts, talked with them or listened while they talked, and even helped with requisite medical attention and anything else that they wanted or needed him to do.

During this time Walt supported himself as a copyist in the Army Paymaster's office and as a part-time correspondent. He had to work only a few hours a day; thus most of the day was free for his hospital work. Although his persistent hospital work occasionally affected his health, forcing him to stop and go to Brooklyn for a rest, Walt always returned and took up his daily rounds.

The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,  
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are  
so young,  
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet  
and sad,  
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have  
cross'd and rested.  
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 260.

Walt not only witnessed the worst part of the war - the appalling suffering - he also saw the worst of reconstruction politics, for he remained in Washington as a government clerk until 1873. He was discharged from his post as clerk in the Department of the Interior after only six months of service, because Secretary Harlan heard that he had written an indecent book.

One of Walt's friends, J. Hubley Ashton, Assistant Attorney General, got him transferred to the Attorney General's office. For eight years he received wages for duties that were often performed by a substitute whom he employed in order to have leisure for his writing.

Walt wrote and published much during this eight-year period. Drum Taps, published in May, 1865, contained primarily reflections upon the war years and his own emotional and imaginative life during that time. The Sequel to Drum-Taps, published in the early autumn of 1865, in the main was intended as a memorial to the war dead. The 1867, or the fourth edition of Leaves of Grass, had as its distinguishing feature Drum-Taps and the Sequel to Drum-Taps added to it as appendages.

The magazine version of Democratic Vistas, Walt's reply to Carlyle's prediction that "the rise of democracy,



as seen in the United States, would destroy civilized culture,"<sup>1</sup> was published in 1871. Another edition of Leaves of Grass was published in 1871 and reprinted in 1872, with "Passage to India" attached.

To this juncture Walt and his poetry had been largely ignored or scorned by his fellow Americans. In the late 1860's Walt began to be widely accepted in England as the best spokesman for American democracy. It all began when Moncure Conway, who visited Walt in Brooklyn on Emerson's recommendation just after the publication of the first Leaves of Grass, recounted his visit in the October, 1866 issue of Fortnightly Review. Although Walt later claimed that some of what was said was erroneous, he was pleased to have the unexpected attention. Walt was quite pleased with an article written by William Rossetti, the brother of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which appeared in 1867 in the London Chronicle.

In the article Rossetti very "outspokenly called Whitman's volume 'incomparably the largest poetic work of our period,' and declared that in time the American poet would rank with Homer and Shakespeare in reflecting his own time and place."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman, p. 106.

<sup>2</sup>Marinacci, p. 265.

Walt agreed to let Rossetti edit a special selection of poems for British readers. This edition became the turning point in his struggle for recognition, for the best magazines began to pay good prices for his poems in 1868. He received one hundred dollars from the Atlantic Monthly for "Proud Music of the Storm"; fifty dollars from London's Broadway Magazine for "Whispers of Heavenly Death"; and twenty dollars from the Fortnightly Review for "Thou Vast Rondure".<sup>1</sup>

Algernon Charles Swinburne, the English poet, praised Walt for representing "the democratic spirit so long dormant in Europe, ever awaiting fulfillment and needing Whitman's encouragement."<sup>2</sup> In an essay entitled "William Blake" Swinburne also favorably compared Whitman and that prophetic English poet. He also wrote a long ode, "To Walt Whitman in America."

It seems ironic that Walt received his first widespread recognition from the English, for he for many years "had criticized Americans for being subservient to English literary verdicts and writing styles, to the detriment of

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman, p. 106.

<sup>2</sup>Marinacci, p. 266.

developing their own national literature. And, now, this American tendency to look toward England would start to work in his favor."<sup>1</sup>

Another important factor in Walt's life during this period was the great satisfaction that he found in his friendships. According to Allen, Walt's friendships with men like John Burroughs, William Douglas O'Connor, Charles Eldridge, J. H. Ashton and others, all men of intellect and position, were never better.

At the same time he maintained a close friendship with a young horse-car conductor named Peter Doyle. Their relationship was simple, relaxed and affectionate. Young Doyle was only eighteen or nineteen when he first met Walt, in 1865 or 1866. He had very little education, but was easy-going, fun to be with, and grateful for the advice, assistance and affection of an older man. They saw each other daily, except when Walt was out of town; then they wrote to each other daily. They seemingly had a very affectionate father-son relationship.

Walt had several female friends; however, none was ever as close to him as Peter. Probably his closest friend in New York was Mrs. Helen Price. In Washington Mrs. Ellen

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

O'Connor was his closest woman friend, although Mrs. Ashton of Washington also liked him a great deal.

Probably the strangest of all his friendships was the one with Mrs. Anne Gilchrist of England. Mrs. Gilchrist became so interested in Rossetti's selections of Walt's poems that Rossetti let her read his copy of the complete 1867 edition of Leaves of Grass. After reading Walt's poems she thought that she could give him the love that he apparently so desperately needed.

She wrote a critical appreciation of Walt's poetry and gave it to Rossetti, who in turn sent it to Walt. Walt responded with books and a photograph of himself which Rossetti passed on to her, and the pursuit began. She wrote such impassioned letters to Walt that the words could have burned the pages on which they were written, for she confessed that she had been married to a kind man whose love she was unable to return fully. She had thought that she had little capacity for love; now she realized that it had only been undeveloped.

For, dear Friend, my soul was so passionately aspiring - it so thirsted and pined for light, it had not power to reach alone and he could not help me on my way. And a woman is so made that she cannot give the tender passionate devotion of her whole nature save to the great conquering soul, stronger in its powers, though not in its aspirations,

than her own, that can lead her forever and forever up and on. It is for her soul exactly as it is for her body. The strong divine soul of the man embracing hers with passionate love--so alone the precious germs within her soul can be quickened into life....This was what happened to me when I had read for a few days, nay, hours, in your books. It was the divine soul embracing mine. I never before dreamed what love meant: nor what life meant. Never was alive before--no words but those of "new birth" can hint the meaning of what then happened to me.<sup>1</sup>

Even in her first letter, she made it plain that she was seriously proposing marriage.

Walt was appalled by her emotions and evidently didn't know how to respond, so he wrote nothing for several weeks. However, seeing her persistence, he finally wrote her a very tactful letter in which he said, among other things:

My book is my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all. In it I have put my body and spirit. You understand this better and fuller and clearer than anyone else. And I too fully and clearly understand the loving letter it has evoked. Enough that there surely exists so beautiful and a delicate relation, accepted by both of us with joy.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, she persisted in her efforts. Seeing this, Walt bluntly wrote:

Let me warn you about myself and yourself also. You must not construct such an unauthorized and

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, Solitary Singer, p. 436.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 438.

imaginary figure and call it Walt Whitman, and so devotedly invest your loving nature in it. The actual Walt Whitman is a very plain personage and entirely unworthy of such devotion.<sup>1</sup>

Even with such discouragement, their strange relationship continued for years.

Walt began experiencing a decline in life, and soon in his life-work, making poems. His decline in life began with his failing health. On the night of January 23, 1873, Walt had a paralytic stroke, and a few days later he had a relapse resulting from exertion. Within a span of five months, Walt lost his sister-in-law, Mattie, and then his mother. His mother's death was the greatest emotional shock that he had ever experienced.

Walt took refuge with his brother in Camden when he became convinced that it would take a while before he could resume work. While recuperating he wrote prose and poetry which he sold to newspapers and magazines in New York City. He wrote two good poems, "Song of the Redwood Tree" and "Prayer of Columbus", which were accepted for publication by Harper's Monthly. As Marinacci has said, "they signaled his rising spirits within an acceptance of his physical condition."<sup>2</sup> In "Prayer of Columbus" it becomes evident

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 440.

<sup>2</sup>Marinacci, p. 290.

that Walt saw a parallel between himself and Columbus. Like Columbus, he was striving for faith:

My hands, my limbs, grow nevertheless;  
 My brain feels rack'd, bewilder'd;  
 Let the old timbers part--I will not part,  
 I will cling fast to Thee, O God, though the waves  
   buffet me;  
 Thee, Thee, at least I know.<sup>1</sup>

He dreamed of eventually being considered an explorer in the realm of literature, as Columbus had been in geography long after his unrecognized achievements.

And these things I see suddenly--what mean they?  
 As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,  
 Shadowy vast shapes smile through the air and sky,  
 And on the distant waves sail countless ships,  
 And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.<sup>2</sup>

Walt received another blow when he was notified that his job with the government would be terminated in July, 1874. He became more determined than ever to earn money from his writing. Hence he began to prepare a two-volume Centennial edition of his own works. The first volume would be another version of Leaves of Grass and the second would be Two Rivulets, a collection of his latest poems and prose.

<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 349.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

To help Walt financially, his friends in England, led primarily by Anne Gilchrist, schemed to sell subscriptions for the new Centennial edition. They received enough subscriptions so that, after all printing expenses were paid, Walt made a little profit.

In the spring of 1876 Walt began to make frequent visits to Timber Creek, a farm about twelve miles from Camden. There he found that his re-established rapport with nature regenerated both his body and his spirit. In fact, his locomotion had improved immensely by the time Mrs. Gilchrist arrived in Philadelphia.

Walt liked her immediately. For years they had shared a remarkable Platonic relationship. Walt visited her and her family quite regularly. In 1878, however, Mrs. Gilchrist moved to Boston, where her daughter was working in a hospital to prepare for her career. Walt missed Anne and the liveliness of her household, so much so that when she spent the winter in New York City he joined her for several weeks, staying with J. H. Johnston, a friend of his. In the spring of 1879 the Gilchrist family returned to England; nevertheless, they remained devoted friends.

That following autumn Walt achieved one of his lifelong ambitions--to take a trip out West. He was invited to



be the guest-poet at the Kansas Quarter-Centennial celebration. After the Topeka celebrations, he traveled farther west to Colorado. The West was everything that he thought it would be, except that the women were still imitating eastern women and not developing an identity of their own. Other than that one disappointment, he was pleased with everything that he saw.

In the summer of 1880 Walt traveled to Ontario, Canada to visit Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, a psychiatrist who had long cherished Walt's Leaves of Grass. After staying a while with the Buckes, he journeyed with his host around the Great Lakes and down the St. Lawrence River and Montreal.

Traveling again, Walt went to Boston in the autumn to give a lecture on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. (He had given this same lecture in New York in 1879. It became customary for him to give his lecture each year after that, for his friends promoted the event so that he might earn several hundred dollars to supplement any other income that he might have had.)

Just as his lifelong ambition to visit the West had been achieved, another ambition was achieved in 1881. He

obtained a very prestigious Boston publisher, James R. Osgood, and finally published an edition of Leaves of Grass with which he was thoroughly pleased. As luck would have it, there arose some controversy over two poems in that edition. Boston's District Attorney and civil authorities declared Leaves of Grass obscene literature, banned its distribution, and threatened to prosecute if "A Woman Waits for Me", "To a Common Prostitute" and some other lines were not deleted from that edition. Walt refused; hence Osgood, after making a reasonable financial settlement and turning over the plates to the poet, completely disassociated himself from Leaves of Grass.

Undaunted by these actions, Walt arranged to have a small publishing firm in Philadelphia, Rees Welch & Co., print copies of Leaves of Grass and Specimen Days and Collect. In a few months the publication of both books was taken over by David McKay, an associate of Rees Welch. The Rees Welch and David McKay copies of Leaves of Grass sold well as a result of the vast amount of publicity surrounding the Boston controversy.

At last Walt had found satisfaction and security in the competence of a publisher. Moreover, he found satisfaction in knowing that his public was increasing both in

America and in Europe. As evidence of his increasing popularity or acceptance, many admirers journeyed to see him. Longfellow, Henry Irving, Lord Houghton and Oscar Wilde were among these admirers.

In 1884 George Whitman built a farmhouse and planned for Walt to move with him and his family, but Walt preferred to stay in Camden, because his intellectual and social life depended upon being near the ferry to Philadelphia. Living in the country could never compensate him sufficiently, for being cut off from friends and visitors. For those reasons Walt bought a house of his own at 328 Mickle Street, where he spent the remainder of his life with the assistance of several devoted persons, one of whom was Mrs. Mary Davis. After Walt became so crippled that he could barely get around, Mrs. Davis became his official live-in housekeeper. She and Walt had a rather unusual agreement; he provided the house, she furnished it; she shopped for the food and prepared it, and he paid for it.

During those final years of his life, Walt was greatly assisted by another person, a young man named Horace Traubel. Traubel became Walt's confidant, his errandboy, and the recorder of his conversations. (He later published their conversations as With Walt Whitman in Camden.) It was

Traubel, primarily, who arranged for celebrations of Walt's birthday, and when he needed a nurse's care he secured funds to pay for all expenses.

In 1890, one of the greatest mysteries relating to Walt's life was generated by a reply that the poet made to John Addington Symonds about the meaning of the "Calamus" poems. He wrote:

My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, etc. have been jolly bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Though unmarried, I have six children, two are dead--one living Southern grand child--fine boy writes to me occasionally--circumstances (connected with their benefit and fortune) have separated me from intimate relations.<sup>1</sup>

Why Walt said all this no one knows, but this aspect of his biography will be indirectly dealt with in Chapter Four.

As his life drew nearer to its end, Walt longed to see his last desire become a reality: copies of the last edition of Leaves of Grass and Prose Works were printed in the autumn of 1891. Walt was able to hold a copy of this edition in his hands while he was lying incurably ill on his death-bed; thus his friends called it the "Death-bed Edition." This edition of his works were distributed to the general public in 1892. Walt died, having completed his lifework on earth, on March 26, 1892, thus ending his long journey through life.

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, Solitary Singer, p. 535.

## CHAPTER II

### WALT WHITMAN'S PHRENOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

#### A. Whitman's Early Interest in Phrenology

Many Whitman scholars have never recognized the tremendous influence that phrenology had on Whitman and, subsequently, on his works. Those who did recognize some degree of influence, moreover, have only mentioned it in passing.

It has been seen in the biographical part of this study that Walt participated in and wrote about what he believed in. Some of the things that he wrote about, and some of his life's experiences, were solidly founded in the faddish science of the period--phrenology. His study of phrenology and his association with the phrenologists had a definite influence on his life as well as on his lifework. This chapter is an attempt to establish the possible reasons, first, for Walt's interest in the science of phrenology and, second, for his exploration of the phrenological terminology.

Over the years very little has been preserved to substantiate all the details surrounding Walt's interest in

phrenology; therefore much has had to be deduced from information recorded in his notebooks of that period and the editorials that he wrote for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

Walt probably became interested in phrenology in January, 1846, when he read and pasted into a notebook an article entitled "Phrenology: A Socratic Dialogue" written by J. D. Whelpley.<sup>1</sup> It appeared in The American Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art and Science, and was written in the form of a Platonic dialogue between Socrates and Phidias in which Socrates defines, lays the foundation for, and even defends the theory upon which phrenology rests.<sup>2</sup> The article is very heavily underscored in many places, indicating Walt's typically intent reading habits. In one marked passage, flanked by two parallel pencil lines, Walt carefully read the following:

But if there is an energy in man, which is unlimited and perfect in its nature, ruling over all his acts, and harmonizing his affections; in one word, if there is anything divine in man, it will be no impiety to ascribe the same to a God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hungerford, p. 357.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Wrobel, Walt Whitman and the Fowler Brothers: Phrenology Finds A Bard (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1969), p. 71.

<sup>3</sup>"Phrenology: A Socratic Dialogue," Catalogue of the Whitman Collection: Trent Collection, compiled by Ellen Frances Frey (Durham, 1945), p. 75, quoted in Wrobel, p. 71.

Only two months after Walt read this article, he became the Editor of the Eagle. Acting in this capacity, Walt attended a lecture on March 6, 1846, delivered by O. S. Fowler, the expert phrenologist. Fowler claimed that phrenologists could "give the most accurate delineation of individual character and the most minute instruction as to the faculties which require development or restraint."<sup>1</sup> Walt was doubtful of these claims, but in expressing his doubts he exhibited his sponge-like nature and used, probably subconsciously, some phrenological jargon. He said that Fowler assumed that "'the bump of marvellousness is very fully developed in his audiences.' His reception of Fowler's lectures was emphatically unfavorable, and he accused Fowler of presenting 'the greatest conglomeration of pretension and absurdity it has ever been our lot to listen to, mingled with the most perfect contempt for the understanding of his audience.'"<sup>2</sup>

Within a week Walt not only devoted a long column in the Eagle to a selection taken from Combe's Physiology of Digestion entitled "The Best Time for Dinner", but favorably

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<sup>1</sup>"A Chance for Men of Bad Character," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, March 7, 1846, quoted in Wrobel, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

reviewed another O. S. Fowler lecture. On November 16, 1846, Walt wrote a favorable review of Phrenology or the Doctrine of the Mental Phenomena by J. G. Spurzheim, one of the older pioneering phrenological scientists. And on December 21, 1846, in a review of George Moore's The Use of the Body in Relation to the Mind, Walt recommended that his subscribers read the book, which explicated "moral deductions from physiological force."<sup>1</sup> This was the same ethical logic which the phrenologists advocated.

Walt began to regard the study of phrenology with such great esteem that on March 10, 1847, in an article entitled "Something about Physiology and Phrenology," Walt asserted that there was much good in studying phrenology; he very severely criticized all who opposed the study of the science. Then he recommended that his subscribers read two of O. S. Fowler's books: Physiology, Animal and Mental, applied to the preservation and restoration of health of body and power of mind and Memory, and Intellectual Improvement, applied to self-education and juvenile instruction.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing publicly to demonstrate his interest in phrenology, Walt reviewed, in the March 12th issue of the

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<sup>1</sup>Wrobel, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 75.



Eagle, L. N. Fowler's book, Marriage: Its History and Ceremonies. And on the 23rd of that same month he reviewed Combe's book, Physiology, and highly recommended it to his readers. This book, like the one already mentioned by Moore, deals with the "relation of physiology to mental well-being and bodily health."<sup>1</sup>

There is evidence that he not only attended phrenological lectures and read phrenological material for his newspaper reviews, but that he carefully studied the science privately for his own personal satisfaction; among his notebooks were newspaper pieces which were not used in his reviews, one entitled "Phrenology" and another, on a subject which interested the phrenologists, entitled "Human and Animal Magnetism." Also, Walt made extensive notes from George Combe's Lectures on Phrenology. On the nature of insanity, for example, Walt concisely noted:

Of insanity--some are affected with melancholia, in these the organ of cautiousness will be found large; some fancy themselves the Deity, in these self-esteem predominates; some are furious, in these destructiveness, or more likely, combativeness. But a small organ may become diseased and often does so.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Richard M. Bucke, Notes and Fragments: Left by Walt Whitman and Now Edited by Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, One of His Literary Executors. (London, Ontario, Canada: Printed for Private Distribution Only, 1899), Item No. 401, p. 82, quoted in Wrobel, p. 79.

In his Lectures on Phrenology Combe classified the human race into the four mental temperaments, the "lymphatic," the "Sanguine," the "bilious," and the "nervous."<sup>1</sup> Walt adopted this phrenological practice of categorizing men by psychological types and utilized it throughout his lifetime both in his poetry and in notes to himself to describe strangers.

He made numerous entries in his notebooks about patients with whom he became acquainted while he served as a nurse in the Washington hospitals. These notes describe the patients physiologically, using the same categories which the phrenologists used. James Myers, for example, was described as "fat, lymphatic, and rosy," and George Sanburn was described as having a "large, sanguine temperament."<sup>2</sup>

He also adopted the phrenologist's technique of using phrenological terminology to describe a person and simultaneously to identify the person's mental and moral faculties as well. For one example, in a description of Robert Burns that was cited by Wrobel Walt said: "He was an average sample of the good-natured, warm blooded, proud spirited,

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<sup>1</sup>"Combe's Lectures on Phrenology," Southern Literary Messenger, V (July, 1839), pp. 461-462, quoted in Wrobel, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup>Walt Whitman: A Catalogue Based upon the Collections of the Library of Congress (Washington, 1955), Item No. 80, p. 18, quoted in Wrobel, p. 80.

amative, alimentative, convivial, young...man of the decent-born middle classes."<sup>1</sup> It would seem almost inevitable that Walt, seriously pursuing a course of reading to prepare himself for his future role as the bard of America, should become attracted to phrenology and its peculiar classification of human types into temperaments. In order that he could properly sing of the cumulative American democratic experience, it was absolutely necessary that Walt have an intimate knowledge of all philosophical, literary, and scientific movements, so that he could sing of them all equally as well. Furthermore, as a poet he had to interpret people, the phrenological classification seemingly provided him with an infallible method of gaining greater insight into human faculties.<sup>2</sup>

Other material in his notebooks indicates that Walt systematically studied phrenology by subscribing to, and carefully reading articles in, two phrenological magazines, The American Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated.

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<sup>1</sup>Walt Whitman, The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman, ed. Richard M. Bucke, Thomas Harned and Horace Traubel, Vol. VI (New York: Putnam Bros., 1902), p. 128, quoted in Wrobel, p. 81. Subsequent references are noted as Camden Edition.

<sup>2</sup>Wrobel, pp. 81-82.

Some of the information that Walt clipped from The American Phrenological Journal that has been preserved or recorded includes "the prospectus of The American Phrenological Journal; a phrenological head, with a definition of each organ corresponding with their appropriately numbered locations; and articles entitled 'The Sultan and His People,' 'Universal Time,' and 'Samuel Rogers: Phrenological Character and Biography.'"<sup>1</sup>

From Life Illustrated, a magazine which offered items of general interest for the average reader, Walt clipped two articles which treated two of the most popular subjects of that period--natural history and travel. They are "Egyptian Museum" and "About Moscow in Russia," dated respectively December, 1855 and December, 1856.<sup>2</sup>

Walt's literary executors found another clipping among his notebooks which deals with "the exultation of life productive by physiological living, an idea which is expressed throughout Walt's works. Like so many other articles clipped by him from phrenological journals, this article shows great evidence of being carefully read. It is heavily underscored, and reveals both marginal notes and a pointing finger. Those

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<sup>1</sup>Hungerford, p. 360.

<sup>2</sup>Wrobel, p. 83.

passages which were heavily marked deal with the innate sense of superiority felt by some people in whom 'life culminates,' a state achieved only through the proper balance of all the faculties and the harmonious interworking of the mental and the physical powers. The article stresses the need for the health of the 'muscular system' which, by its vigor and health, exalts the rest of the human frame and sharpens the intellectual activity and the senses."<sup>1</sup> This could possibly be the source for Walt's interest in the physique, or his projection of the idea of physiological living to sharpen the senses. He celebrates this belief in such poems as "I sing the Body Electric" and "By Blue Ontario's Shore."

After publicly sanctioning this science and carefully studying it in private, it seems only natural that Walt would visit its headquarters. He probably visited the Phrenological Cabinet several times just out of curiosity, but he also went there specifically to have his cranium examined and to have a chart of bumps drawn up by an expert phrenologist, for, as Hungerford says, "Walt was turning in his preparatory years to what he regarded as sound scientific

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<sup>1</sup>Wrobel, p. 84.

analysis of human character on which he could base his poetry."<sup>1</sup>

Here is Walt's Chart of Bumps that was first printed in the Brooklyn Daily Times in 1855:

Phrenological Notes of Walt Whitman, by L. N. Fowler, July, 1849--This man has a grand physical constitution, and power to live a good old age. He is undoubtedly descended from the soundest and hardiest stock. Size of head large. Leading traits of character appear to be Friendship, Sympathy, Sublimity and Self-Esteem, and markedly among his combinations the dangerous faults of Indolence, a tendency to the pleasure of Voluptuousness and Alimentiveness and a certain reckless swing of animal will, too unmindful, probably, of the convictions of others.

Amativeness large 6, Philoprogenitiveness 6, Adhesiveness 6, Inhabitiveness 6, Concentrativeness 4, Combativeness 6, Destructiveness 5 to 6, Alimentiveness 6, Acquisitiveness 4, Secretiveness 3, Cautiousness 6, Approbativeness 4, Self-Esteem 6 to 7, Firmness 6 to 7, Conscientiousness 6, Hope 4, Marvellousness 3, Veneration 4, Benevolence 6 to 7, Constructiveness 5, Ideality 5 to 6, Sublimity 6 to 7, Imitation 5, Mirthfulness 5, Individuality 6, Form 6, Size 6, Weight 6, Color 3, Order 5, Calculation 5, Locality 6, Eventuality 6, Time 3, Tune 4, Language 5, Causality 5 to 6, Comparison 6, Suavitiveness 4, Intuitiveness or Human Nature 6.<sup>2</sup>

Walt was so proud of the phrenological findings that he had his chart printed five times during his lifetime, permitting all to see and to know that he could indeed be America's poet. Hungerford indicates that Walt slightly

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<sup>1</sup>Hungerford, p. 360.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 363.

modified this phrenological reading in reprintings following the September, 1855 self-review in the Brooklyn Daily Times. It is said that he omitted the first two sentences of the reading and the phrase "too unmindful, probably, of the conviction of others."<sup>1</sup> He probably felt that this phrase would project the wrong impression of himself, and that was something that he wanted to avoid. This arbitrary action demonstrates, however, that Walt felt no remorse about modifying something as impressive and as scientific as phrenology was to him to suit his own whims or his own particular needs.

B. Walt Whitman's Business Association with the  
Phrenologists

Walt's association with the phrenologists continued after he had his Chart of Bumps drawn up, but only on a different level. It developed into a business association: Fowler and Wells served as distributors for the first edition of Leaves of Grass, and as publishers as well as distributors for the 1856 edition. The circumstances surrounding this business agreement were not recorded, but evidence of their peculiar business relationship does exist.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 363 n.

An advertisement in the New York Tribune on July 6, 1855 announced the sale of Leaves of Grass by Swayne, No. 210 Fulton St., Brooklyn, and by Fowler and Wells, No. 308 Broadway, New York. Four days later the name of Swayne was withdrawn from the advertisement.<sup>1</sup> Why he withdrew it is not known, but Wrobel conjectured that "he may have had some misgivings after reading the volume or he may have been discouraged by sales."<sup>2</sup>

Swayne's withdrawal left Fowler and Wells as sole agents or distributors of the book of poems. It seemed a little odd to Gay Wilson Allen that they would distribute this book, for, as he said in Walt Whitman, "this was a firm of phrenologists, and Leaves of Grass was not phrenology."<sup>3</sup> Although Leaves of Grass was not phrenology, it must be remembered that during its gestation period Walt imbued his mind with many phrenological ideas, and that some of these ideas were inevitably to be expressed in some of his writings. Furthermore, it was from the phrenologists that Walt received the assurance that he needed vigorously and unrelentingly to

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup>Wrobel, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman, p. 45.



pursue his lifework--"making poems." Fowler and Wells made every effort to sell the volume of poems. They sent copies of the book to several journals and to several prominent people, and they ran advertisements in the Tribune continuously. Nevertheless, all of their efforts to sell the book failed.

Although they were probably disappointed by the lack of sales of Leaves of Grass, they were evidently impressed by Walt's journalistic abilities, for he published the first of eleven articles in Life Illustrated entitled "The Opera", which was printed on November 10, 1855. The second article, "The Egyptian Museum", was published on December 18, 1855, and the third article, "Christmas at Grace", was published on January 26, 1856.

During the time that Walt was writing articles for Life Illustrated the editorial staff of that magazine frequently wrote commendatory notices and reprinted favorable reviews of Walt's work. They may have had mercenary motives for doing this, or they may well have been "affirming Fowler's earlier estimate of Walt's natural gifts as a poet."<sup>1</sup>

Whatever their motives were, their praises were copiously supplied. A good example of their laudatory notices is the

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<sup>1</sup>Marinacci, p. 130.

introduction which prefaced an article written by Walt  
entitled "America's Mightiest Inheritance", which appeared  
in Life Illustrated on April 12, 1856:

Our readers will not overlook the article on the noble Language we inherit, written for their special delectation by the author of "Leaves of Grass;" nor will they need any assurance of ours that the article is instructive and suggestive. But as our columns may be enriched by further contributions from the same source, a word or two of introduction may not be out of place or out of taste on the present occasion.

Walt Whitman is more a democrat than any man we ever met. He believes in American principles, American character, American tendencies, the "American Era," to a degree that renders his belief an originality. When he exclaims, in "Leaves of Grass," "By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms," he expresses the very soul of democracy, and his daily walk and conversation are in accordance therewith. Emphatically and peculiarly, he is a man of the people. He is also a man of ideas, of various considerable talent. We do by no means agree with him in all of his opinions, but the directness, the simplicity and utter sincerity with which he announces and maintains his opinions are always delightful. Walt Whitman is not a young man, as some have supposed. He has lived long enough to have observed much, and to have reached a variety of conclusions.

We commend his writings to the friendly attention of our readers. They will not often, we think, read an article by him without drawing from it something that will encourage, stimulate, expand, or correct them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Walt Whitman, *New York Dissected*, eds. Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari (New York: Rufus Rockwell Wilson, Inc., 1936), p. 62, cited by Wrobel, p. 105.

This flattering acknowledgement was followed by a reprint of a very favorable review of Leaves of Grass, written by William Howitt, which had originally appeared in the London Dispatch. On May 17th another reprint of a favorable review appeared in this phrenological publication. It was written by Mrs. Sara Payson Willis Parton (Fanny Fern), and it originally appeared in the May 10th issue of the New York Ledger. She said:

Well baptized, fresh, hardy and grown for the masses, "Leaves of Grass" thou art unspeakably delicious, after the forced, stiff, Parnassian exotics for which our admiration has been vainly challenged. Walt Whitman, the effeminate world needed thee.

It (America) needed a man who dared speak out his strong honest thoughts in the face of pusillanimous, toadying, republican aristocracy.<sup>1</sup>

While Walt was busy writing more articles, "Voltaire" and the six that are collectively known as "New York Dissected," his agents were busy preparing for the release of the second edition of Leaves of Grass. They undoubtedly felt that they had whetted the public's interest by printing the remarkable notices and reviews already mentioned.

The promotion of the second edition was kicked off with a grand announcement in the August 16, 1856 issue of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 166-167, Wrobel, p. 106.

Life Illustrated. This announcement was followed by advertisements in the Tribune and in the New York Times which ran during the months of September and October. They placed Leaves of Grass in their Boston and Philadelphia bookstores and did everything else conceivably possible to stimulate sales. Despite all this, the public reception of the book was quite disappointing.

In June, 1857, there was some indication of friction between Walt and the phrenologists. In a note to Sara Tyndale, he complained that--

Fowler and Wells are bad for me. They retard my book very much. It is worse than ever. I wish now to bring out a third edition--I have now a hundred poems ready (the last edition had thirty-two)--and shall endeavor to make an arrangement with some publisher to take the plates from F&W and make the additions needed, and so bring out the third edition. F&W are very willing to give up the plates--they want the thing off their hands.<sup>1</sup>

Walt had received a letter from Samuel Wells prior to writing the letter above to Mrs. Tyndale; it was dated June 7, 1856. In that letter Wells indicated that he was

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<sup>1</sup>"Walt Whitman to Sara Tyndale," June 20, 1857, The Correspondence of Walt Whitman, 1842-1867 (The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman, ed. Gay Wilson Allen and Sculley Bradley, Correspondence of Walt Whitman, Vol. I, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller. New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961), p. 44.

writing to insist on the omission of certain objectionable passages, in Leaves of Grass" or he would "decline publishing it."<sup>1</sup>

#### C. Walt Whitman's Intellectual Relation to Phrenology

Walt carefully studied phrenology because he found that intellectually, on certain subjects, he and the phrenologists were in agreement. They believed in and vigorously supported such causes as the abolition of tightlacing; the water cure; temperance; women's rights; educating the mental, physical and moral nature of man in the schools; hereditary descent; good health; good diet; and exercise. All of these things were advanced primarily by the phrenologists of that day and had their roots deeply imbedded in phrenological principles.

Perhaps one of the prime reasons that Walt carefully studied the science of phrenology was related to his stupendous interest in the English language. In an essay entitled "America's Mightiest Inheritance," Walt manifests "his interest in studying the evolutionary character of words by tracing their etymological sources. He recognized the need for language to constantly evolve new meanings and borrow foreign words to keep pace with concurrent changes

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<sup>1</sup>"Samuel Wells to Walt Whitman," The Correspondence of Walt Whitman, Vol. I. 44n.

in the customs and thoughts of a dynamic society. Like Emerson, he saw the function of the poet to be that of a 'namer,' to observe and record changes in language and to aid in this evolutionary process."<sup>1</sup>

During the gestation period of Leaves of Grass Walt was in search of a vocabulary. He is quoted as having said that "In America, an immense number of new words are needed. ...Words are wanted to supply the copious trains of facts, and flanges of facts, feelings, arguments, and adjectival facts, growing out of all new knowledges."<sup>2</sup> At the end of this note he wrote the word phrenology.<sup>3</sup> In a memorandum consisting of words and phrases, the word phrenology appears again.<sup>4</sup> Walt compiled a list of new occupations and sciences which had a specialized vocabulary that had not been incorporated into everyday usage, from which he thought that he

<sup>1</sup>Holloway and Adimari, pp. 54-55, quoted by Wrobel, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup>Horace Traubel (ed.), An American Primer by Walt Whitman (Boston: Small, Maynard and Co., 1904), p. 9, cited by Hungerford, p. 380.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Camden Edition, IX, p. 207, cited by Hungerford, p. 380.

might extract words. On this list is the phrase "Words of Human Phrenology."<sup>1</sup> Obviously he thought that he could derive a useful working vocabulary from phrenology.

Walt reveals his needs for new vocabulary in the following entry:

Words of approval, admiration, friendship. This is said among the young men of These States, that with a wonderful tenacity of friendship, and passionate fondness for their friends, they yet have remarkably few words of names for the friendly sentiments--They seem to be words that do not thrive here among the muscular classes, where the real quality of friendship is always freely to be found --Also, they are words which the muscular classes, the young men of These States, rarely use, and have an aversion for;-- they never give words to their most ardent friendships.<sup>2</sup>

When he studied phrenology, Walt found a vocabulary for love and friendship which suited him. Amativeness, phrenologically defined, meant the instinct of physical love; Adhesiveness designated the quality of attachment on which friendship rests. As the poet whose function it was to aid in the evolutionary process of his language, Walt slightly varied the meanings of these words to suit his own purpose, just as he slightly varied his own Chart of Bumps. The new

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<sup>1</sup>Traubel, An American Primer, p. 27, cited by Hungerford, p. 380.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

meanings that he attached to amativeness and adhesiveness and his use of these words will be discussed in the next chapter.

Walt once said that he sometimes thought of Leaves of Grass as "only a language experiment."<sup>1</sup> In tracing how he used the phrenological vocabulary, the accuracy of this statement becomes recognizable. "He was always trying to use phrenological terminology to characterize his generation, its customs, and its events, believing that it reflected a portion of America's contemporary thought and process."<sup>2</sup> Here are excerpts from "By Blue Ontario's Shore" to show how he experimented with the language by using phrenological vocabulary to express his ideas. He describes the masses of people thus:

Here is what moves in magnificent masses careless of  
particulars,  
Here are the roughs, beards, friendliness, combative-  
ness, the soul loves,  
Here the flowing trains, here the crowds, equality,  
diversity, the soul loves.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Francis O. Mattiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), p. 517.

<sup>2</sup>Wrobel, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup>Bradley, pp. 284-285.



In these excerpts from the same poem, the influence of phrenology is reflected:

The freshness and candor of their physiognomy, the copiousness and decision of their phrenology.<sup>1</sup>

The prevailing ardor and enterprise, the large amateness,---<sup>2</sup>

In another poem, "Faces", he uses the jargon as well as the principles of phrenology as a foundation for sound interpretation of character:

Sauntering the pavement or riding the country by-road here then are faces:

Faces of friendship, precision, caution, suavity, ideality,

The spiritual-prescient face, the always welcome common benevolent face,

The face of the singing of music, the grand faces of natural lawyers and judges broad at the back top,

The faces of hunters and fishers bulged at the brows...<sup>3</sup>

These faces can be given appropriate phrenological names. "Faces of friendship" were those that would be phrenologically assigned large "Adhesiveness," the organ of which was located on the sides of the head toward the back. The precise person's organ of "order" would be found over his eyes, while the organ of "Cautiousness" would be found in the rear of the head. "Suavity" and "Ideality" were found

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 380.

on the forehead, just below "Spirituality." The organ of "Benevolence" would be just forward from the crown of the head; the well-developed organ of "Tune" among the singers was over the eyes directly above "Order." The lawyers and judges, with heads that were "broad at the backtop," are characterized with large organs of "Firmness," "Conscientiousness" and "Cautiousness." Even the hunter and fisher had to have the appropriately developed organ; in their case it was "Calculation," an organ located along the eye-brow.<sup>1</sup>

In the poem "A Song of Joys" Walt catalogues the various joys readily accessible to all human beings; in each section, or line, one of the joys of man is depicted. Hungerford points out that each one of these joys is a joy corresponding to one of the phrenological organs:

O to bathe in the swimming-bath, or in a good place  
along shore,  
To splash the water! to walk ankle-deep, or race  
naked along the shore.<sup>2</sup>

The phrenologists held the belief that the organ of "Aquative-ness" proceeds from a person's love of liquids, "desire to drink, love of water, washing, bathing, swimming, sailing, etc."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hungerford, pp. 367-368.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 372-377 passim.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 376.

The joy of friendship or "Adhesiveness" was presented thus:

O to attract by more than attention!  
How it is I know not--yet behold! the something which  
obeys none of the rest,  
It is offensive, never defensive--yet how magnetic  
it draws.

Hungerford sees numerous other phrenological organs which are depicted in "A Song of Joys" including "Alimentiveness," "Constructiveness," "Agreeableness," "Sublimity," "Combativeness," "Destructiveness," "Self-Esteem" and "Vitateness."<sup>1</sup> Thus phrenology definitely had some influence on Walt's works as is evidenced in this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 377.

## CHAPTER III

### TWO ELEMENTS OF PHRENOLOGY IN WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY

#### A. Amativeness in the "Children of Adam" Cluster of Poems

It has been demonstrated that Whitman's incorporation of phrenological terminology into his everyday vocabulary was reflected in his work. This chapter will show his extensive use of the ideals represented by the phrenological terms amativeness and adhesiveness in two clusters of poems to express antithetical ideas and, perhaps, thereby unveil the element of ambiguity in himself.

Amativeness, the phrenological term designating instinctive heterosexual attraction, was perfectly suited to embody the idea that Whitman wished to celebrate in a section of Leaves of Grass which was originally entitled "Enfans d'Adam" and finally entitled "Children of Adam." One of his manuscript notes, a series of plans that he jotted down in preparation for the composition of these poems, reveals the theory of the cluster of poems:

Theory of a Cluster of Poems the same to the passion of Woman-Love as the Calamus-Leaves are to adhesiveness, manly love.

Full of animal fire, tender, burning,---the tremulous  
ache, delicious, yet such a torment.

The swelling elate and vehement, that will not be  
denied.

Adam, as a central figure and type.

One piece presenting a vivid picture (in connection  
with the spirit of a fully complete, well developed,  
man, eld, bearded, swart, fiery,--as a more than rival  
of the youthful type-hero of novels and love poems.<sup>1</sup>

The poems in the "Children of Adam" section of Leaves  
of Grass are bound together by the myth or allegory intro-  
duced in the title. This myth does not adhere to the tra-  
ditional Christian story of Adam's fall which has given  
Christian civilization its concept of the innate nature of  
man as evil: Adam through his disobedience degraded his  
original innocence and brought death into the world. Con-  
ceived in sin and born of flesh, each man must be born of  
the spirit again in order to regain the paradise that Adam  
lost for mankind. Walt inverts this long-accepted and  
deeply-imbedded interpretation: not Adam but his descendants  
("children") have lost the garden through self-degradation  
of their innately innocent natures; to regain paradise, man  
must purge not the physical but the sense of the physical  
as sinful; he must be born again, not through spiritual  
denial of the flesh but through spiritual transfiguration

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<sup>1</sup>Camden Edition, IX, p. 150, quoted by Allen, The  
Solitary Singer, p. 251.

of the flesh. It is not man's shame, but his glory, that he is a child of Adam; and he must not suppress, but frankly acknowledge and accept, the Adamic in his nature."<sup>1</sup>

The first poem, "To the Garden the World," the eighth poem, "Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals," and the last poem, "As Adam Early in the Morning" are devoted entirely to this myth, and it permeates and gives heightened significance to all the other poems.

In "To the Garden the World" Walt concisely sets forth his main symbols: the beginning of human existence in the Garden of Eden, the necessity of sex in the cycles of life, and the innocence and naturalness of "the quivering fire" that attracted Adam to Eve and man to woman ever since.<sup>2</sup>

In the second poem of this cluster, "From Pent-up Aching Rivers", Walt emotionally sets forth his theme of sex and simultaneously intermingles all the images of the poems to follow in this statement of poetic intent:

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<sup>1</sup>James E. Miller, A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Allen The Solitary Singer, p. 251.

From pent-up aching rivers,  
 From that of myself without which I were nothing,  
 From what I am determ'd to make illustrious even if  
     I stand sole among men,  
 From my own voice resonant, sing the phallus,  
 Singing the song of procreation...<sup>1</sup>

Walt continues his sex program in the third poem of the cluster "I Sing the Body Electric." This poem is the longest in the cluster, and probably the most significant, because it allows him to sing of the "body electric" as a necessary instrument of amative love, it allows him to continue his myth of the Adamic man, and, simultaneously, it allows him to achieve his literary intention, which was "to indicate the path between reality and the soul."<sup>2</sup> To accomplish these things Walt utilizes a literary technique that is seen throughout his poetry. Allen says that in this technique, known as "the expanding ego", "the externals, the catalog of concrete details, are transcendental symbols of what he might call 'spiritual truths.'" Thus we have the curious paradox in Whitman's style of snapshot imagery joined to ambiguity. Even in his most vivid realism he is still allegorical and subjective."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook (Chicago: Packard and Co., 1946), p. 378.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 384.

The premise upon which this poem is based is set forth in the first section of the poem, and all other sections are simply variations of the same premise.

I sing the body electric,  
 The armies of those I love engirth me and I  
 engirth them,  
 They will not let me off till I go with them,  
 respond to them,  
 And discorrupt them, and charge them full with  
 the charge of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

The "body electric", then, is the body containing the "charge of the soul." When the "body electric" comes in physical contact with its beloved one, then the beloved one is charged "full with the charge of the soul." Through this "electrifying" experience the bodies become discorrupt, and hence ready to regain paradise.

The next poem, "A Woman Waits For Me", is fundamentally constructed on the idea contained in the rather ambiguous phrase "Sex contains all." "In the romantic sense there is the commonplace meaning that fulfillment of sexual desire is the epitome of man's experience, that the entire meaning of life may be compressed within the one intense moment of sexual fulfillment. But, more literally, sex does contain all. It is only through sex that the procession of life continues."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Miller, p. 45.



The Adamic man tells the Woman:

Through you I drain the pent up rivers of myself,  
In you I wrap a thousand onward years,  
On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of  
me and America.

The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce and  
athletic girls, new artists, musicians, and singers,  
The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes in  
their turn,

I shall demand perfect men and women out of my  
love-spendings,

I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others,  
as I and you interpenetrate now,

I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers  
of them, as I count on the fruits of the gushing  
showers I give now,

I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life,  
death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now.<sup>1</sup>

"The plant and river imagery, fused with the sexual,  
dramatically portrays the vital function of sex. The 'pent-  
up river' is the eternity contained in man's sexual poten-  
tial. But it is only a potential as long as it is 'pent-up';  
used to nourish and make fertile the plant (woman), the  
river becomes time itself--a 'thousand onward years.'  
Not birth alone but 'birth, life, death, immortality' are  
to result from the 'gushing showers.' In this conceit,  
sex does indeed contain all. The 'pent-up rivers' are  
rivers of time flowing from the past, from Adam, into the

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 89.

present, the Children of Adam, and, if they do not remain 'pent-up' into the future, into eternity."<sup>1</sup>

In the preceding poems Whitman primarily treated the procreative act and the resulting spiritual fulfillment. In "Spontaneous Me" he appears to be trying to effect in the Children of Adam a greater awareness of another aspect of heterosexual attraction--the vehement sensations of desire in both the male and female.

"Spontaneous Me" is an embodiment of one of the ideas which he set forth in his theory of this cluster of poems: it depicts the "animal fire, tender, burning--the tremulous ache, delicious, yet such a torment."<sup>2</sup> Here is a passage that exemplifies these sensations:

The young man that flushes and flushes, and the  
 young woman that flushes and flushes,  
 The young man that wakes deep at night, the hot hand  
 seeking to repress what would master him,  
 The mystic amorous night, the strange half welcome  
 pangs, visions, sweats,  
 The pulse pounding through palms and trembling, encir-  
 cling fingers, the young man all color'd, red,  
 ashamed, angry;  
 The souse upon me of my lover the sea, as I lie  
 willing and naked...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Miller, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Camden Edition, IX, p. 150, quoted by Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup>Bradley, p. 91.

Although Walt rather strikingly vented both male and female erotic sensations in this poem, the poem is dominated by auto-eroticism. On this point Gay Wilson Allen says that "the poet is conscious of his own body rather than the body of his lover. It celebrates the life impulse latent in him, but it is not in imagery, feeling, or thought a love poem, and may be indicative of ambiguous emotions in Whitman himself at this period."<sup>1</sup>

In his celebration of procreation Walt simultaneously celebrates freedom from restraints and inhibitions. Remember that in the myth of the Children of Adam Whitman was encouraging them to cast aside the conventions adhered to by the Christian civilization and to regain paradise through purging the sense of the physical as evil and through spiritual transfiguration of the flesh. He celebrates this freedom from restraints and inhibition in "One Hour of Madness and Joy" when he says:

To be absolv'd from previous ties and conventions,  
I from mine and you from yours!<sup>2</sup>

This celebration continues in "Native Moments" when he says that "I am for those who believe in loose delights..."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>Bradley, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

In "We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd" he says "We have voided all but freedom and all but our own joy."<sup>1</sup>

"Once I Pass'd Through a Populous City" and "I Heard You Solemn-Sweet Pipes of the Organ" both express the "animal fire", "the tremulous ache" experienced in heterosexual attraction. In the first poem he says

...I must not go,  
I see her close beside me with silent lips sad  
and tremulous.<sup>2</sup>

In the second poem he says

Heart of my love! you too I heard murmuring low  
through one of the wrists around my head,  
Heard the pulse of you when all was still ringing  
little bells last night under my ear.<sup>3</sup>

"Facing West from California's Shores" is "connected to the procreation theme in a vague pantheistic manner:"<sup>4</sup> Walt elevates his sex theme here to embrace the history of the race.

Facing west from California's shores,  
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfounded,  
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house  
of maternity, the land of migrations, look afar,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 151.

Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle  
almost circled;<sup>1</sup>

The final poem in the cluster, "As Adam Early in the Morning", serves as an epilogue for the group and returns to the Garden of Eden allegory, closing the section with lyric praise of the human body.<sup>2</sup>

Although the procreative theme was not uniformly or consistently maintained in "Children of Adam", Walt carried out his theory of the cluster of poems as set forth on p. 61 of this study, and he vaguely adhered to the myth of the Children of Adam. Even though his thoughts or attitudes toward sex do not adhere to the conventions set by our Christian civilization, they are nevertheless those views encompassed by his idea of amateness, and must be accepted as such.

#### B. Adhesiveness in the "Calamus" Cluster of Poems

If Walt's unconventional poetic expressions of amateness or man's love for woman are unique, then his poetic advocacy of adhesiveness is even more so. According to Malcolm Cowley, Walt once defined adhesiveness as "a personal attraction between men that is stronger than

<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 151.

ordinary friendship."<sup>1</sup> In Democratic Vistas Walt cites adhesiveness as one of the two halves that together constitute the essence--and tension--of democracy:

It [democracy] is the old yet ever-modern dream of earth, of her eldest and her youngest, her fond philosophers and poets. Not that half only, individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the race comrades, and fraternizing all. Both are to be vitalized by religion.<sup>2</sup>

"In another passage of the work Walt returns to the fundamental concept of his democratic ideal:

Intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man--which, hard to define, underlies the lessons and ideals of the profound saviours of every land and age and which seems to promise, when thoroughly develop'd, cultivated and recognized in manners and literature, the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States, will then be fully express'd."<sup>3</sup>

To distinguish adhesiveness from amateness the poet says, "It is to the development, identification and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship, that I look for the counter-balance and offset of our materialistic and

<sup>1</sup>Malcolm Cowley, "Walt Whitman: The Secret," The New Republic, CXIV (April 8, 1946), p. 482.

<sup>2</sup>Camden Edition, V, p. 80, quoted by Miller, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

vulgar American democracy and for the spiritualization thereof.' He goes on to characterize this 'manly friendship' as fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long' and again stresses the necessity of such 'Calamus' emotion for democracy, 'without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself.'"<sup>1</sup>

In the poem "Fast-Anchor'd Eternal O Love!" Walt poetically distinguishes between "the amative and the adhesive relationships--the one offering the secure ties of earth, the other a roaming comraderie of kindred souls:"<sup>2</sup>

Fast-anchor'd eternal O love! O woman I love!  
O bride! O wife! more resistless than I can tell,  
the thought of you!  
Then separate, as disembodied or another born,  
Ethereal, the last athletic reality, my consolation,  
I ascend, I float in the regions of your love O man,  
O sharer of my roving life.<sup>3</sup>

In amative love emphasis is on the physical or the sexual aspects; in adhesive love emphasis is on the spiritual. The above poem substantiates this contention. Love of man for man is "disembodied," "ethereal," "the last athletic reality." As used here, "athletic" connotes health and robustness. "Ascend" and "float in the regions of our love"

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Marinacci, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup>Bradley, p. 113.

connotes a flight or a lifting into spiritual realms. Man is the "sharer" of his "roving life," the companion on his spiritual journey.

Walt announces his poetic intent for this cluster of poems in "In Paths Untrodden":

In paths untrodden,  
 In the growth by margins of pond-waters,  
 Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,  
 From all the standards hitherto publish'd from  
     the pleasures, profits, conformities,  
 Which too long I was offering to feed my soul  
 That the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in  
     comrades,  
 Here by myself away from the clank of the world,  
 Tallying and talk'd to here by tongues aromatic,  
 No longer abash'd, (for in this secluded spot I  
     can respond as I would not dare elsewhere,)  
 Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit  
     itself, yet contains all the rest,  
 Resolv'd to sing no songs to-day but those of  
     manly attachment,  
 Projecting them along that substantial life,  
 Bequeathing hence types of athletic love,  
 Afternoon this delicious Ninth-month in my  
 forty-first year,  
 I proceed for all who are or have been young men,  
 To tell the secret of my nights and days,  
 To celebrate the need of comrades.<sup>1</sup>

This resolution to celebrate "manly attachment" leads to a renunciation of all other interests. This renunciation occurs in the poem entitled "Scented Herbage of My Breast":

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 97.



I will say what I have to say by itself,  
 I will sound myself and comrades only, I will  
 never again utter a call only their call,  
 I will raise with it immortal reverberations  
 through the States.<sup>1</sup>

In "Whoever you Are Holding Me Now in Hand" Walt  
 says

I give you fair warning before you attempt me  
 further,  
 I am not what you supposed, but far different.<sup>2</sup>

James Miller says that this difference of which Walt  
 speaks is "only in his capacity for 'Calamus' love; his  
 exterior, what he appears to be, gives no indication whatso-  
 ever of the depths possible to him in spiritual attachment  
 to others."<sup>3</sup> Many of the poems in this cluster portray  
 the powerful and satisfying effect of this type of attach-  
 ment. "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances" is one of  
 these poems. In it Walt states that, in the doubts and  
 uncertainty about the things that he perceives around him,  
 about "identity beyond the grave", such love awards "untold  
 and untellable wisdom."

To me these and the like of these are curiously  
 answer'd by my lovers, my dear friends,  
 When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long  
 while holding me by the hand,

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>3</sup>Miller, p. 65.

When the subtle air, the impalpable, the sense that  
 words and reason hold not, surround us and pervade us,  
 Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom,  
 I am silent, I require nothing further,  
 I cannot answer the question of appearances or that  
 of identity beyond the grave,  
 But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,  
 He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me.<sup>1</sup>

Another poem, "When I Heard at the Close of the Day,"  
 dramatically portrays the importance for this type of love  
 to the individual; neither the plaudits that he received  
 in the capital nor the accomplishment of plans could make  
 him as happy as the thought that his "dear friend, his  
 lover, was on his way, coming." "In this brief drama Walt  
 uses the language and conventions of romantic love in such  
 details as 'all that day my food nourish'd me more,' and  
 particularly in the vivid closing picture:"<sup>2</sup>

In the stillness in the autumn moonbeam his face  
 was inclined toward me,  
 And his arm lay lightly around my breast--and  
 that night I was happy.<sup>3</sup>

Other poems which portray the power and satisfaction held  
 by manly attachment are "A Glimpse" and "We Two Boys  
 Together Clinging."

<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup>Miller, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup>Bradley, p. 105.

"I Hear It Was Charged Against Me" is an apparent statement of Walt's cognizance of the possibility that his expression of manly love may be misinterpreted:

I hear it was charged against me that I sought to  
destroy institutions,  
But really I am neither for nor against institutions,...<sup>1</sup>

Walt's only interest lies in establishing "in every city of these States" the institution of "the dear love of comrades" which will be "without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument." In "The Base of All Metaphysics" Whitman states that "the dear love of man for his comrades" is at the base of all philosophies and of the various kinds of love.

Yet underneath Socrates clearly see, and underneath  
Christ the divine I see,  
The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction  
of friend to friend,  
Of the well-married husband and wife, of children  
and parents,  
Of city for city and land for land.<sup>2</sup>

This "friendship" on which all social relationships are based is celebrated as the main element that will make America the ideal indissoluble continent.

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever  
shone upon,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 103-104.

I will make divine magnetic lands,  
 With the love of comrades,  
 With the life-long love of comrades.<sup>1</sup>

This ideal friendship was especially meant for America, for the prairie grass itself in "inland America" offers the symbolic example; the "spiritual corresponding" is to be the "copious and close companionship of men"--those with "sweet and lusty flesh clear of taint," "those of earth-born passion, simple, never constrain'd, never obedient."<sup>2</sup> In "A Promise to California" Walt tells the West that "soon I travel toward you to remain, to teach robust American love."<sup>3</sup> Walt's belief that "the main purpose of these States is to found a superb friendship, exalte, previously unknown. Because I perceive it waits, and has been waiting, latent in all men"<sup>4</sup> is revealed in "To the East and to the West."

When Whitman says---

It seems to me there are other men in other lands  
 yearning and thoughtful,

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 110

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

It seems to me I can look over and behold them in  
 Germany, Italy, France, Spain,  
 Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia or Japan,  
 talking other dialects,  
 And it seems to me if I could know those men I  
 should become attached to them as I do to men  
 in my own lands,  
 O I know we should be brethren and lovers,...<sup>1</sup>

he is suggesting that adhesive love is not contained on  
 just one continent - it spans around the world. Brotherly  
 love has no boundaries.

The antithesis of this broad social theme is one  
 which seems almost like a confession. It is introduced  
 in "Not Heaving from My Ribb'd Breast Only", which,  
 after presenting agitated reactions that are usually  
 associated with romantic love such as "husky pantings  
 through clinch'd teeth" and "murmurs of my dreams while  
 I sleep", concludes:

Not in any or all of them O adhesiveness; O  
 pulse of my life!  
 Need I that you exist and show yourself any more than  
 in these songs.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the poems became the only means to permit  
 Whitman to vent his adhesiveness. This idea is also seen  
 in "Trickle Drops" and in "Sometimes With One I Love."  
 Perhaps the most outstanding "confession" poem is "Here  
 the Frailest Leaves of Me":

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my strongest  
lasting,  
Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not  
expose them,  
And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.<sup>1</sup>

"These poems suggest that the poet has found sufficient fulfillment in art for certain emotional needs in his personality frustrated in real life. There seems to be frank recognition by the poet that his poetry represents the sublimation of his adhesiveness...The poet reveals here not his guilt but his poetic method--ambiguity."<sup>2</sup>

Miller believes and demonstrates that he intentionally and consciously used ambiguity as a poetic technique.<sup>3</sup>  
At the center of ambiguity in this section is the symbol introduced in the title, "Calamus."

Walt uses calamus, or sweet flag, first as an extension of the metaphor "leaves of grass," for "it is a very special kind of grass unique in connotations, just as 'manly attachment' or 'athletic love' is an emotion limited rather than universal, with distinct differences in its intense spirituality from other kinds of love. As further elaborated in 'Song of Myself', the calamus plant not only

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>Miller, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

has 'the biggest and hardest kind of spears of grass' and a 'pungent bouquet', it is found growing in out of the way, secluded spots and around ponds. As they are developed in 'Calamus' each of these attributes of the plant suggests some aspect of the love of comrades: the size and toughness of the spears symbolize the depth and hardness of such love; the distinctive odor suggests the spirituality of the attachments; growth in clusters suggests the twofold results of the realization of such emotion: personal attachment and democracy; the seclusion of the plant indicates the rarity of such revolutionary friendships."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, a poetic development of the calamus as a symbol is a part of the drama of the section. In the elaboration of the calamus image Walt achieves some of his most successful effects. Not only are all the attributes of the calamus plant utilized as symbolic, but the parts of the plant, the leaf and the root, are fully exploited in all their possible meanings. It is in such exploitation, where meaning on one level frequently expands to include meaning on another level, that ambiguity becomes a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

conscious poetic device. Although the resulting complexity makes for an enriched poetry, it is the kind of poetry easily open to distortion in interpretation. Such has been the fate of 'Calamus';<sup>1</sup> this will be discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 71-72.



## CHAPTER IV

### The Controversy

Whitman's apparent sincerity in his treatment of adhesiveness, particularly in the "Calamus" cluster of poems, activated biographers and critics alike to scrutinize and speculate on the poet's personal life.

When he said

Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my  
strongest lasting,  
Here I shade and hide my thoughts,  
I myself do not expose them,  
And yet they expose me more than all my  
other poems.<sup>1</sup>

"he was surely opening the door to a personal interpretation of this cluster as actively tying in with his life and thoughts."<sup>2</sup>

As a consequence of that poetic statement and others such as

Camerado this is no book,  
Who touches this touches a man,

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<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>Fredson Bowers, Textual and Literary Criticism: The Sandors Lectures in Bibliography, 1957-58 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1959) p. 61.

It is I you hold and who holds you,  
I spring from the pages into your arms...<sup>1</sup>

"many biographers assumed that the book and the man were one: 'If you would know Walt Whitman, they said, read Leaves of Grass.' Or they reversed the order, and said that one could not understand Leaves of Grass without knowing its author."<sup>2</sup>

After reading Whitman's poetry some critics were appalled at what they had read. George Santayana, for an example, found Whitman's poetry "shocking" and considered it to be "one of the finest examples of a return to The Poetry of Barbarism." "It is the most sincere possible confession of the lowest--the most primitive type of perception."<sup>3</sup>

Several friends of the poet's, especially the "hot little prophets," defended the Calamus section against

<sup>1</sup>Bradley, p. 412.

<sup>2</sup>Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman As Man, Poet and Legend with a Checklist of Whitman Publications 1945-1960 by Evie Allison Allen (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>George Santayana, Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (New York, 1957), p. 178, as cited by Allen, Walt Whitman As Man, Poet and Legend, pp. 104-105.

the charge of indecency by raising the opposite cry, purity, and by pointing to the author's own saintlike, spiritual life as proof that the poems could not be unwholesome. William Sloane Kennedy refers to "Calamus" as Whitman's "beautiful democratic poems of friendship" and adds, "A genuine lover speaks in the Calamus pieces: a great and generous heart there pours forth its secret. Set side by side with these glowing confessions, other writings on friendship seem frigid and calculating."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Eduard Bertz of Germany likewise accepted Whitman as a saintly prophet, but became suspicious of the poet's avidity for fame and began to examine him more critically. With the help of some literature on sexual abnormality, he wrote a book called The Yankee Saint (1905) in which he professed to regard Whitman as one of the major lyric poets of the world, but insisted that the traits of character which he encouraged his readers to interpret as those of the prophet of a new democratic love between men were actually manifestations of homosexuality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Reminiscences of Walt Whitman (London: Alexander Gardner, 1896), pp. 133-134.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, Walt Whitman As Man, Poet and Legend, p. 109.

This was an idea also held by several other critics. It probably was first actively pursued by John Addington Symonds, an English scholar of the Renaissance and classical Greek and Latin literature, who recognized in the "Calamus" poems emotions similar to those of "Greek friendship" between men and the homosexuality of Renaissance artists.<sup>1</sup> After asking Whitman about these similarities the poet answered him in the following letter dated Augusta 19, 1890:

About the question on Calamus, etc; they quite daze me. Love is only to be rightly construed by and within its own atmosphere and essential character--all of its pages and pieces so coming strictly under--all that the Calamus part has even allowed the possibility of such construction as mentioned is terrible--I am fain to hope the pp themselves are not to be even mentioned for such gratuitous and quite at the time undreamed and unvouched possibility of morbid inferences which are disavowed by me and seem damnable.

.....

My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, etc., have been jolly bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Though unmarried, I have had six children--two are dead--one living Southern grandchild--fine boy writes to me occasionally--circumstances (connected with their benefit and fortune) have separated me from intimate relations.<sup>2</sup>

Symonds was not absolutely convinced by Whitman's response, but he stopped making the inferences to which

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid. p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 535.

Whitman had objected, saying that the "adhesiveness" of comradeship in the "Calamus" poems "is meant to have no interblending with the "amativeness" of sexual love, "for it is undeniable that Whitman possessed a specially keen sense of the fine restraint and continence, the cleanliness and chastity, that are inseparable from the perfectly complete nature of healthy manhood."<sup>1</sup>

However, Symonds admitted that "those unenviable mortals who are the inheritors of sexual anomalies will recognize their own emotions in Whitman's 'superb friendship...latent in all men.'" And he wondered whether the poet's "own feelings upon this delicate topic may not have altered since the time when Calamus was first composed."<sup>2</sup>

At this point in his life Symonds could not have been very suspicious of Whitman's friendship with Peter Doyle. There is no indication that he had any knowledge of the notebook entries that Whitman made which have led many biographers and critics to endeavour to decipher what he meant by them.

On July 15, 1870 he wrote:

To GIVE UP ABSOLUTELY and for good, from this present hour, this FEVERISH, FLUCTUATING, useless, undignified

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<sup>1</sup>John Addington Symonds, Walt Whitman: A Study (New York: B. Blom, 1967), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

pursuit of 164--too long, (much too long) persevered in--so humiliating--It must come at last and had better come now--(It cannot possibly be a success) LET THERE FROM THIS HOUR BE NO FALTERING, NO GETTING--at all henceforth, (NOT ONCE, under any circumstances)--avoid seeing her, or meeting her, or any talk or explanations--or ANY MEETING WHATEVER, FROM THIS HOUR FORTH, FOR LIFE.<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to reveal the meaning of the numbers "16" and "164" many biographers and critics advanced theories about the love affair that Whitman had decided must be ended immediately and irrevocably. Hungerford interpreted "164" as being a phrenological symbol standing for "Hope," which in some phrenological charts was personified as a woman.<sup>2</sup> Allen says that "hope in this sense would have meant expectation of financial or professional success; with Whitman most probably literary success. But the extremely personal implications of Whitman's notations make it difficult to accept this abstract interpretation. Furthermore, there is no supporting evidence that Whitman's literary ambitions had abated in the slightest degree. And he had never pursued mere

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<sup>1</sup> Emory Holloway, ed. Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman: Much of Which Has Been But Recently Discovered with Various Early Manuscripts Now First Published, (New York: Douleday, page and Co., 1921), p. 96, as cited by Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 422.

<sup>2</sup>Hungerford, p. 351.

financial success; had, indeed, many times passed up opportunities to gain economic reward--though naturally he wanted a competence for himself and his mother and Eddie."<sup>1</sup>

Allen cites the possibility that Whitman "cautiously reversed the sex of the third-person pronouns in the notation to guard against a chance reader's understanding their implications."<sup>2</sup> According to Allen, Oscar Cargill privately suggested that Whitman did this and used a code in which letters of the alphabet are numbered from 1 to 26. "Thus 16 would stand for P and 4 for D. One objection to this theory is that Whitman did not break off his friendship with Peter Doyle. But, on the other hand, in the same notebook, following the passage quoted, Whitman wrote: 'Depress the adhesive nature. It is in excess--making life a torment. All this diseased, feverish disproportionate adhesiveness.'" Speculating further, Allen says that "if Walt had been indulging in a heterosexual affair, his 'adhesive' nature might have interfered with his enjoyment of it. So that it could not 'possibly be a success.'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, The Solitary Singer, pp. 422-423.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 424.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Another quotation that can be related to the two notebook entries is a letter that Whitman sent to Peter Doyle several days after he made the entries:

Dear Pete. Well here I am home again with my mother, writing to you from Brooklyn once more. We parted there, you know, at the corner of 7th St., Tuesday night. Pete there was something in that hour from 10 to 11 o'clock (parting though it was) that has left me pleasure and comfort for good---I never dreamed that you made so much of having me with you, nor that you could feel so downcast at losing me. I foolishly thought it was all on the other side. But all I will say further on the subject is, I now see clearly, that I was all wrong.<sup>1</sup>

To recapitulate, on July 15th Walt felt that he was "fancying what does not really exist in another, but is all the time in myself alone..." On July 26th, just before leaving Washington, he was surprised to find that his affection for Peter Doyle was reciprocated, though after three and a half years of knowing him Whitman had "foolishly though it was all on the other side." Many years later John Addington Symonds, whose own emotions gave him special insight into such relationships, placed a sinister construction on this friendship.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Camden Edition, VIII, p. 48, quoted by Allen, The Solitary Singer, p. 423.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 424.



Allen further contends that "had it been a physical rather than a psychological relationship, Whitman might not have been so torn by doubt and desire to end his self-deception as he had been on July 15, 1870. His "adhesive nature" had long made his "life a torment," but he struggled to "depress" it. The important fact is not his affection for men like Lewis Brown, Thomas Sawyer, and Peter Doyle, but his struggle for self-control and self-understanding. Out of that struggle had sprung many of his poems, and even some of his profoundest insights into human nature, such as love as the solvent of all social evils."<sup>1</sup>

Malcolm Cowley, in "Walt Whitman: the Secret," says that people find it painful to admit or accept the fact that Walt was homosexual and that he "had worked hard at creating the myth" about his great roughness or masculinity. He contends that critics tended to follow a line of defense that the poet had prepared for himself. "The first line of defense was simply to deny that he had any abnormal instincts; the second was to invent imaginary sins and derelictions that would distract attention from

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Cowley, p. 481.

his real faults."<sup>1</sup> "If we are going to build theories about Whitman's work we shall have to base them on something firmer than concealments and apologies."<sup>2</sup>

John Burroughs seemingly was not trying to conceal anything or apologize for Whitman's actions when he says in his January, 1864 journal: "And so kind, sympathetic, charitable, humane, tolerant a man I did not suppose was possible. He loves everything and everybody. I saw a soldier the other day stop on the street and kiss him. He kisses me as if I were a girl."<sup>3</sup> Burroughs consciously accepted Whitman's expressions of affection as being purely an innocent gesture on his part.

Edward Carpenter, one of Whitman's English friends and author of Days with Walt Whitman, probably felt the most intimate sympathy and identity with him. He shared the poet's feelings for other men, and also believed that the secrecy regarding sex should be broken down and that a stronger, more socially beneficial love between men was possible.

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<sup>1</sup>Cowley, p. 481.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 482.

<sup>3</sup>Clara Barrus, Whitman and Burroughs Comrades (N. Y.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1931), p. 17.

Dr. W. C. Rivers wrote a pamphlet called Walt Whitman's Anomaly in 1913. Dr. Rivers meticulously collected his examples from Whitman's writings and marshaled his arguments to prove that the poet was a homosexual of the "passive kind." He thought that the poet's emphatic denial of Symond's inferences was probably based on a misunderstanding of homosexuality. He asserted the idea that Whitman probably thought that if he said that he had fathered at least one child then he would be absolved from suspicion. Many of his later defenders made the same assumption.

His English biographer, Henry Bryant Binns, was one of these. He is primarily known for having created a sensual romance in New Orleans for Whitman. Binns suggests that because the woman was of a higher social rank than Whitman she never acknowledged him as the father of her child (or children). This theory seemed so logically possible that Leon Bazalgette also advocated it.

Another of Walt Whitman's critics, Basil De Selincourt, also advocated and elaborated the New Orleans romance. He considered the poet an immoral figure because he deserted his children and their mother.<sup>1</sup> His theory of the "Calamus"

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<sup>1</sup>Basil De Selincourt, Walt Whitman: A Critical Study (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 195.

cluster was similar to most of the others. He was hesitant in believing Symonds' theory of the cluster, but he does at least question Whitman's reasons for writing what he wrote in "Earth, My Likeness."

He says "What motive and justification of "Earth, My Likeness" is there if its meaning is not what Symonds supposes it to be?" It includes "a recognition of an element of danger attending all highly pitched personal emotion, the danger of an irruption of sex into a sphere in which it has no meaning."<sup>1</sup>

Continuing his discussion of "Calamus," he says: "Calamus" is thus the celebration of the ideal relationship of sexual associations, Whitman confines his hymns of it to the love of one man for another. But he does this by a poetic license merely. It is equally of course the relation of woman to woman, or of man to woman in the rare cases in which difference of sex becomes irrelevant. Nor of course is it suspended in relations which are founded upon sex. It is suspended only when sex perverts or prevents a relationship."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

It must be added that De Selincourt felt that Whitman's "aim in Leaves of Grass was not so much to make a statement of the truth in equipoise as to make a statement which, thrown in the scales against accredited views, would correct their bias and leave the balance adjusted accurately."<sup>1</sup>

Like Binns, Bazalgette and De Selincourt, Emory Holloway attempted to prove that Walt had had at least one heterosexual relationship in the article "Whitman Pursued." Holloway bases his argument on the fact that several people, in describing the poet's room, noted the presence of an unidentified photograph of a beautiful woman who was not a member of his family, but was allegedly a sweetheart of Whitman's.

To prove that Whitman had intimate heterosexual relations Holloway presents a letter to Whitman from Peter Doyle, found in the Pierpont Morgan Library and dated September 27, 1868, which contains the following:

Jim Sorrill sends his love and best respects and says he is alive and kicking but the most thing that he don't understand is that young Lady that said you make such a good bedfellow.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>2</sup>Emory Holloway, "Walt Whitman Pursued," AL, XXVII (March, 1955), p. 5.

Holloway also presents a letter from Binns to Carpenter in which Binns declares, "Maynard says that Doyle admitted he knew a woman in Washington with whom Whitman had sex relations."<sup>1</sup> Holloway says that "in his biography of Whitman, in referring to Whitman's often quoted assertion to Symonds that he was himself an unmarried father, H. B. Binns prints what information he had picked up pertinent to the matter. "'There is a love letter extant, signed with a pseudonym dated from New York in 1862, evidently written by a cultivated woman.'" But Binns does not "'tell all that he knows, for in the letter to Carpenter, to which two references have already been made, he is more explicit'". "'Traubel showed me a letter from Ellen Eyre (of N. Y.) in 1860...'"<sup>2</sup>

In one of his notebooks which is now a part of the Harned Collection, Holloway says that Whitman wrote:

Frank Sweeney (July 8, 1862) 5th Ave. Brown face, large features, black moustache (is the one I told the whole story to about Ellen Eyre)--talks very little.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Naumberg, Jr., "A Collector Looks at Whitman," Princeton Univ. Library Chronicle, III (Nov., 1941) pp. 12-13, quoted by Holloway, "Walt Whitman Pursued," p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Holloway, "Walt Whitman Pursued," p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Louis Untermeyer, The Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman (New York, 1949), p. 33, as quoted by Holloway "Walt Whitman Pursued," p. 7.

Edwin Haviland Miller located the original Ellen Eyre letter in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection in Detroit, and in attempting to establish the identity of this woman, who could possibly have been Whitman's lover, he conjectured that Ellen Eyre was neither Ada Clare or Mrs. Juliette Beach, as many people would have thought, but that she possibly was Ellen Grey, "Who was an actress who grew up in Brooklyn and was happily married. In his 1857 notebooks (now in the possession of Mr. Feinberg), Whitman noted that 'before the first of May' he saw Ellen Grey at the Bowery Theatre. During the evening she told him of her marriage, and on the following day wrote a playful letter inviting Whitman to visit her--with no amorous intentions, but with awareness of the impropriety in her present position of an association with a thoroughly unrespectable poet. Of course there is the possibility that this letter marked the beginning of an affair."<sup>1</sup>

In another article entitled "Walt Whitman's Love Affairs" Holloway presents evidence which destroys practically all possibility of truth in any of the evidence upon which the theories of a New Orleans romance is based. In

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<sup>1</sup>Edwin Haviland Miller, "Walt Whitman and Ellen Eyre," American Literature, XXXIII (March, 1961-January, 1962), pp. 67-68.

this article Holloway makes several outstanding points, and one is that "Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass may be assumed to reveal, as it professes to do, the whole personality of the author; but not every reader knows how to take that revelation, where to allow for the author's conscious or unconscious distortion of fact or for his sublimation of experience."<sup>1</sup>

With this in mind Holloway presents the four bits of evidence upon which biographers based their theories; then he offers explanations based on facts which significantly modify or totally disprove the evidence.

He says that the theory is based on (1) Whitman's cryptic "reply to persistent and disconcerting queries from John Addington Symonds;" (2) the conjecture that the reason for the poet's sudden departure from New Orleans was "a romance which threatened his prophetic and artistic independence;" (3) the fact that "Whitman's characteristic verse could not be traced back beyond the 1848 journey to New Orleans" and that therefore his experiences of this journey were "taken to be the inspiration which liberated his song;" (4) the poem, "Once I Pass'd through a Populous City" "seems to describe a transitory residence in some

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<sup>1</sup>Emory Holloway, "Walt Whitman's Love Affairs," Dial, LXIX (1920), p. 473.



picturesque city of which the poet can recall only the passionate attachment of a woman who detained him there and was broken-hearted at his parting."<sup>1</sup>

Holloway indicates that upon examining a manuscript diary of the Poet's he found that the cause of Whitman's precipitate departure from the South was an estrangement between him and his employers and a difference over money matters. Moreover, the name "Whitman" does not appear as that of the father of any child whose birth was entered, as the law required, on the records of the city's Health Dept.-- at least not before 1850. Nor is it in the archives of the old St. Louis Cathedral, whose baptismal records included the great majority of the births in the city."<sup>2</sup>

"And as to the posteriori evidence of the maturer and more poetic composition which followed the New Orleans residence, it may be true that the first rhythmical lines of the Leaves were written just after the return north rather than just before departing for the south; but they appear in a notebook bearing the date 1847, to which year, for

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 474-475.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 476.

various reasons which cannot here be set forth, we must assign his first definite efforts to compose the unique volume which was to see the light of print in 1855."<sup>1</sup>

Holloway discredits the evidence of the poem "Once I Pass'd through a Populous City" by revealing his discovery of the original manuscript of this poem in a private library in New York which showed that "historically it belongs next to "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," among the Calamus poems."<sup>2</sup> The original version of the poem is:

Once I passed through a populous city, imprinting  
my brain, for future use, with its shows,  
architecture, customs and traditions.  
But now of all that city I remember only the man  
who wandered with me there, for love of me,  
Day by day, and night by night, we were together.  
All else has long been forgotten by me--I  
remember, I say, only one rude and ignorant  
man, who, when I departed, long and long  
held me by the hand with silent lips, sad and tremulous."<sup>3</sup>

Another significant bit of evidence which Holloway uses to substantiate his contention is a previously unpublished passage of an article which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 477.

in June, 1907, based on the personal recollection of the former Mrs. William O'Connor of Walt Whitman:

He (Whitman) had not met a certain lady, and by some mischance a letter revealing her friendship for him fell into her husband's hands, which made this gentleman very indignant and jealous, and thereupon, in the presence of his wife and another lady, he abused Walt. All that excited Walt's sympathy for the lady, over and above the admiration and affection he felt for her, so that in telling about it, he said, 'I would marry that woman tonight if she were free.' Correspondence was kept up between them for some time after that and he was very strongly attracted to this lady. This is the only instance I have known where he was strongly attracted toward any woman in this way. It was this lady for whom he wrote the little poem in "Children of Adam" beginning: "Out of the rolling ocean the crowd."

Describing this lady to me he said that she was quite fair, with brown hair and eyes, and rather plump and womanly and sweet and gentle, and he said that she bore herself, with so much dignity and was so keenly hurt by what her husband had said, that I think that drew her to him more. It was in 1864(?).

In connection with the above:--The idea that he conveyed to me was that he did not think it would have been well for him to have formed that closest of ties, he was so fond of his freedom; would have been a great mistake if he had ever married. He said to me many times that he did not envy them their children. He often used this expression, 'Well, if I had been caught young I might have done certain things or formed certain habits.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid. p. 479.

There is one habit that Walt definitely formed, and that was secrecy. He only let his friends and followers know what he wanted them to know, and although certain facts herein presented have been unveiled the aura of mystery surrounding Whitman's life still prevails.

## C O N C L U S I O N

Walt Whitman had a definite interest in phrenology. This interest, although slight at first, developed into a deeply entrenched belief in a short period of time.

Many ideas set forth in that faddish quasi-science were adapted by Whitman. But he saw phrenology primarily as one source of a renovated vocabulary. It was the vocabulary that he derived from phrenology and used to poetically express antithetical emotions that has led to the continued speculation regarding the significance of interpreting the poetry as a reflection of the poet's life. The veil of secrecy with which he so carefully concealed the facts about himself may never be totally lifted.

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